

Inclusive Choirs: Welcoming Youth with Exceptionalities

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By

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ABSTRACT

This basic interpretive qualitative study investigated the benefits and challenges of inclusive choir singing for youth with exceptionalities. Fourteen participants were recruited for this study including youth choir members with exceptionalities, parents, family members (e.g., siblings), choir directors, and a choir manager. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were used to generate data. The study findings included four main overarching themes: health benefits, positive aspects, challenges, and inclusive choir singing as different than other activities. The current study's findings have contributed to furthering research in the area of singing and health, and have several implications for both practice and future research in the area.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Brenda, Diane, & Mary.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Singing has a way of bringing people together. Whether it is singing in a community group, a competitive auditioned choir, or just a fun activity, people around the world sing together “motivated primarily by a love of music” (Clift, Nicol, Raisbeck, Whitmore, & Morrison, 2010, p. 3) as well as the joys of the act of singing itself. Group singing has the potential to provide a welcoming environment where all participate together, no matter their ability level, background, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. A growing body of literature indicates a number of benefits associated with group singing such as psychological, socio-emotional, and physical aspects of health (Clift et al., 2010). Several studies have also been done that look at choir singing and the benefits for special populations (e.g., homeless male amateur singers, prison inmates, intergenerational choirs, and different age groups such as the elderly, university students, and adolescents). Choir singing, particularly as an inclusive activity, provides a unique opportunity for growth and development for youth with exceptionalities. This belief was the focus of the present study. This chapter includes a statement of the study’s purpose and significance, some important definitions, and the personal experiences that led me to this topic.

The Study and its Significance

The purpose of this study was to further investigate the health benefits of group singing for youth with exceptionalities by looking at the following question: What perceived benefits and challenges have youth with exceptionalities and their families experienced based on their participation and involvement in an inclusive choir?

Several papers have reviewed the literature on the health benefits of (group) singing (Clift et al., 2010; Gick, 2011; Riley & Gridley, 2010) and concluded that further research is

needed because the topic “has received only limited research attention” (Clift et al., 2010, p. 9). Findings are encouraging in terms of a range of positive physical, emotional, psychological, and social outcomes. There are also several studies on singing with special populations such as: amateur/adolescent singers (Bailey & Davidson, 2003; Parker, 2011), prison choirs (Cohen, 2009; Silber, 2005), intergenerational singing (Cusicanqui, 2004), disadvantaged adults (Dingle et al., 2012), university choir singers (Jacob, Guptill, & Sumsion, 2009), elderly (Hillman, 2002), patients with chronic pain (Kenny & Faunce, 2004), individuals with eating disorders (Pavlaou, 2009), and adults with cancer (Young, 2005). However, limited research has been done on choirs that include youth with exceptionalities. Only four resources on inclusive choir singing were found (Abery et al., 2003; Haywood 2006; Merkt, 2012) which shows that there is a gap in the literature about inclusive choirs and the benefits of singing for choir members with exceptionalities. By investigating how individuals with exceptionalities and their family benefit from singing in an inclusive choir, the current literature on singing was extended to a new population with implications for practitioners in psychology, education, music therapy, and other helping professions.

All of the participants in the current study were connected in some way to the same community inclusive choir program, a program that has two inclusive choirs. One group is for children /youth, and one choir is for young adults (age 17 and older). One of the participants was the mother of a choir member in this program but also directed her own inclusive choir in a school setting. This interview offered some additional insight into inclusive programming in a school setting, as well as the experiences of typical choir members participating in inclusive choir singing. However, the focus of interviews was on the experiences of youth choir members with exceptionalities and the community inclusive choir they participated in.

Definitions

Key terms are used throughout the thesis document. The language choices reflect a combination of being based on the research methodology, clarifying the difference between terms that are often used interchangeably in existing literature, and personal preferences. They were chosen intentionally and my decision making process is explained in the following sections.

Health versus Wellbeing

The terms *health* and *wellbeing* are often used interchangeably in everyday language. Over time the meanings of these terms have come to define a broad spectrum of areas encompassing physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, and even spiritual areas of human existence. The World Health Organization (WHO, 1948) defined the term health as: not only the absence of disease or infirmity, but also “a complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being” (p. 100). For the purpose of this study, the concept of health was understood as: one’s daily functioning, as well as the process of change and growth when faced with the challenges of life (Frankish, Veenstra, & Moulton, 1999). Health is one’s capacity to be self-sufficient. Frankish et al. (1999) defined health as: “the capacity of people to adapt, respond to, or control life’s challenges and changes” (p. S72), which is tied to personal circumstances, social, cultural, economic, and environmental influences.

For this study, wellness was conceptualized as an ongoing process in which people’s “awareness, understanding, and active decision-making capacity are aligned with their values and aspirations” in aiming to “reach their highest potential” (Goss et al., 2010, p. 30). Wellbeing refers to an ideal state of health and the “sense of life satisfaction of the individual” (Frankish et al., 1999, p. S72).

Based on these definitions of health and wellbeing, the two terms are not used interchangeably for the research presented, as one may often see elsewhere. Instead, health and wellbeing are used to represent two separate aspects of the human experience and perception of functioning, as explained above.

Exceptionality versus Disability

For the purposes of this study, the word *exceptionality* was chosen in the place of *disability*. In Canada there is no commonly used definition for the term disability. However, the *Federal Disability Reference Guide* explains that this is due to the complex nature of the term, which reflects an “interaction between features of a person’s body and mind and features of the society in which they live” (Government of Canada, 2013, para. 6). The guide goes on to discuss a disability can be something a person is born with or happen later in life, can be permanent or temporary, worsen or improve, and range in severity. The most widely accepted definition for disability in Canada is that of the *World Health Organization*, as “an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions” (Government of Canada, 2013, para. 9).

Numerous definitions of the term exceptionality have existed over the years in an attempt to establish criteria for supports and services such as special education programs for children (Schwean & Saklofske, 1999). However, the term exceptionality has recently become more commonly used in place of disability as it is a broader, comprehensive term describing “any individual whose physical, mental, or behavioural performance deviates substantially from the average” (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 2005, p. 5), and who would benefit from support in order to meet their individual needs to succeed. Therefore, exceptionality was used in this document to refer to any type of intellectual or physical disability.

Inclusion versus Integration

The words *inclusive* and *integrated* are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to children/youth being a part of *regular* classroom programming in the school system (Harman, 2011). However, these two terms actually mean very different things. An inclusive model takes on any changes necessary to meet the needs of its students in order for all to participate (Harman, 2011). Inclusive programming follows a philosophy that everyone has unique needs in order to learn and succeed. Integrated models are different from inclusive ones in that they only provide adaptations and supports for students who are seen to have a disability (Harman, 2011). Though students with and without exceptionalities are together in integrated programming, only students with significant needs get accommodations. Therefore, the terms inclusive and integrated are actually quite different. For the purposes of this study, the term inclusive was used as opposed to integrated. Based on the above definitions, only participants from inclusive choirs were included in this study.

Youth

The term *youth* refers to individuals in their adolescent years. Berk and Shanker (2006) defined adolescence as the last of the five periods of development that researchers tend to segment child development into. They described adolescence as individuals aged eleven to eighteen years in the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. This is a time when puberty leads to an “adult-sized body and sexual maturity” (Berk & Shanker, 2006, p. 6), thought processes become more abstract and idealistic, and schooling begins to focus on preparing these youth for higher education and the work force. Though not all of the criteria provided by Berk and Shanker (2006) are necessarily relevant to all youth with exceptionalities, the description

provides a general guideline for what the term youth refers to. For the purposes of this study youth were choir members aged ten to eighteen years.

A Little About Me

A variety of personal experiences inspired my interest in this research topic. First, I grew up in a very musical family. My parents both sing, my brother is a professional flutist and music therapist, and even my extended family were musical as well. Family gatherings always include some sort of singing, especially at Christmas time when the carol books are brought out and I, or one of my cousins, accompany on the piano. I took lessons in piano, French horn, and voice. I also participated in several choirs and bands throughout the years. I always found these group musical activities to be fun and developed lifelong friendships through my participation in them. However, it was always singing, as opposed to playing an instrument, that I found most therapeutic and health promoting. With singing, there is nothing to worry about bringing except yourself. Personally I found singing, whether on my own or as part of a group, was the one thing that helped to elevate my mood when I was having a bad day. I feel that singing was a strong health promoting activity for me emotionally, physically, and socially.

Secondly, over the last few years I have gained experience working with individuals with exceptionalities. This began with volunteer work with an organization called Best Buddies in Vancouver, British Columbia. It was run through the university and paired students with peers in the community who had exceptionalities. I was paired with a young woman diagnosed with Down Syndrome. We spent time together about once or twice a week and became good friends. This experience sparked my interest in working with individuals with exceptionalities and I have continued to do so ever since.

I worked two summers as a camp counsellor at Camp Easter Seal (CES) in Manitou Beach, Saskatchewan. My experiences there were wonderful and enlightening in that I met people from around the province who wanted to create an accepting, safe, and fun environment for all those involved. At CES the mantra was to recognize the abilities of others instead of focusing on the disabilities. Camp provides campers with a getaway from everyday stresses; as well as an opportunity to try new things, and have fun with peers who faced many of the same daily challenges. At camp, we often sang campfire songs together as a group and the campers always seemed to look forward to and really enjoy that time together. Even if they were not able to sing, many of these campers showed that the music brought them joy through their body language and facial expressions.

I am still involved in work with individuals with exceptionalities. I currently work as part of a mentorship program through the Canadian Disability Strategy (CDS) with a young woman who has Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). This program is similar to the Best Buddies program I spoke of earlier, in that we spend time together about once a week. I provide additional support to help her to be successful in her everyday life. My role is to be a friend, confidante, mentor, and advocate for her. We have become good friends and I really enjoy the time that we spend together. As we both are musicians, we sometimes sing or play music together. Music has been very therapeutic for her in that it brings her joy and she enjoys the interaction as we play music together.

Chapter Organization

Following this first chapter, there are four chapters. In Chapter 2 a review of relevant literature related to group singing and health benefits, the benefits of group singing for diverse populations, and inclusive recreational activities are explored. Chapter 3 provides a description

of the research methodology and procedures used such as: basic interpretive design, recruitment, data collection and analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. Then in Chapter 4 the results of the study are presented categorized by overarching themes. Finally in Chapter 5 the results, their connection to existing literature, as well as strengths, limitations, and future implications of this study are discussed.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following chapter presents an overview of research completed in the area of group singing and health benefits, the reported benefits of group singing for specific populations of singers, and research on inclusive choirs/other similar inclusive group activities. The existing literature in these three areas helped to guide this research project to further understand these areas, as they pertain to youth with exceptionalities and inclusive choirs.

Health Benefits of Singing

Research related to the health benefits of singing has recently become more popular. Two recent reviews of the literature were conducted: Clift, Nicol, Raisbeck, Whitmore and Morrison (2010) and Gick (2011) examined the current research related to group singing, health and wellbeing, revealing similar conclusions. Clift et al. (2010) reviewed research from 2000 to 2010 that looked specifically at group singing and health or wellbeing. They organized the research found into four areas: qualitative research on “pre-existing singing groups in communities” or for “specific populations” (such as: homeless and disadvantaged adults, adult inmates, volunteers, church choirs, and retirement community choirs), “experimental research involving pre-existing choirs or singing groups established specifically for research purposes,” studies where group singing was used as a therapeutic intervention, and studies exploring “the value of group singing for older people with diagnosed dementias” (Clift et al., 2010, p. 4). When participating in group singing, Clift et al. (2010) found that existing research has noted not only the psychological and social benefits, but also physical benefits such as improved breathing, speech, and posture. These findings supported the belief that participation in choir singing promoted several areas of an individual’s health.

Gick (2011) reviewed research on singing and health from a health psychology perspective using a multidimensional bio-psychosocial conceptual framework. Gick (2011) investigated the biological, psychological, and social factors that contributed to health, as discussed in the literature reviewed. The literature reviewed by Gick (2011) showed that research on singing often showed support for the health and wellbeing benefits of the activity, but lacked conclusive evidence. Therefore, Gick (2011) recommended that further investigation of preliminary findings on the health and wellbeing benefits of singing was needed to “determine their underlying mechanisms, and compare singing to other activities that may benefit health and wellbeing” (p. 203). Both Gick (2011) and Clift et al. (2010) gave good overviews of the health and wellbeing benefits of group singing that have been found in existing literature, between 2000 and 2010. They also both stressed the importance of continued research in this area in order to better understand what is special about group singing as opposed to other activities that may be beneficial, and what the specific health benefits are for those who participate in choirs. However, neither of these literature reviews looked specifically at one aspect of health and most of the research included was with adult participants.

Further studies investigating specific health benefits of group singing have been completed since the above-mentioned literature reviews. Much like the literature reviewed by Clift et al. (2010) and Gick (2011), recent literature found on the benefits of choir singing tended to focus on three aspects of health: psychological (Clift, Hancox, Morrison, et al., 2010; Gick & Busch, 2012), physical (Clift, Hancox, Morrison et al., 2009; Stacy, Brittain, & Kerr, 2002), and social-emotional (Gick & Busch, 2012; Riley & Gridley, 2010; Sandgren, 2009). For instance, Riley and Gridley (2010) found that choir singers felt that group singing provided a variety of health benefits. The benefits discovered in their research included cognitive/ psychological

(developing language skills), physical (breathing, posture, and overall fitness), and social-emotional (involvement in the community, developed friendships, and feeling of belonging) health.

Several studies focusing on the connection between group singing and psychological health were found. Clift, Hancox, Morrison, et al. (2010) had over six hundred choral singers complete questionnaires to measure physical, psychological, social, environmental wellbeing, and the effects of choral singing on quality of life. The results of this study confirmed that “a large majority of choristers perceive[d] the experience of singing to be a positive and beneficial one” (Clift et al., 2010, p. 31). Gick and Busch (2012) also studied the psychological benefits of choral singing by having 59 choir members complete a general information questionnaire, personality inventory, and several other scales. Results suggested that even just one choir rehearsal could increase positive affect, personal growth, and vitality.

The connection between choir singing and physical health has also been explored in existing literature. Clift, Hancox, Morrison, et al. (2009) investigated the effects of choral singing on physical health by having over 1000 choir members respond to a single questionnaire survey question: “What effect, if any, does singing in a choir have on your physical health?” (p.52). The results were thematically analyzed to reveal four areas of perceived physical benefits including: improved breathing and lung function, better posture and body control, stress relief, and increased energy and physical activity. A review of literature by Stacy, Brittain, and Kerr (2002) revealed similar ways in which singing has been found to be beneficial for physical health. Literature they reviewed suggested that singing was not only beneficial for breathing capacity, posture, and respiratory symptoms, but also helped to reduce muscle tension.

Choir singers seem to find the social-emotional benefits of group singing to be one of the most important (and fun) aspects of participating in a choir. The feeling of belonging, friendship, and connection to others seemed to be a key component in participants' desire to continue singing in a choir. In fact, when asked in one study what some of the downsides or challenges are of participating in a choir, participants "struggled to name any negative associations with their singing experiences" (Riley & Gridley, 2010, p. 11). Singing in a choir seemed to be a very positive experience. Gick and Busch (2012) reported that most choir members experienced "high levels of perceived social support" (p. 55) through their participation in choir singing. Sandgren (2009) similarly found immediate wellbeing benefits from participation in group singing. The study investigated how emotional states changed for 212 participants on pre- and post-measurements of a choir rehearsal.

As shown by the number of studies and literature reviews completed, the connection of group singing and health has begun to be explored more frequently in the last decade. The results of these studies show several areas that can be positively affected by participation in choir singing, even just after one rehearsal. The body of studies found suggested that there are several health benefits to be gained by participating in choir singing. Though all of the studies and literature reviews mentioned above have done well to establish research on this topic and begun to generate a data base, there has also been a call for more research in the area. Most of the studies found used a qualitative approach with questionnaires or semi-structured interviews, showing that this approach has been successful in generating useful data. However, none of these studies looked at specific populations or if there were differences in the effectiveness of group singing due to age, socio-economic status, cultural background, or other diverse

populations. Therefore, further investigation into existing literature on the effectiveness of group singing for specific populations was conducted.

Group Singing and Specific Populations

Studies on the participation of specific populations in choirs or group singing have become more prevalent, particularly since 2005. Recent research has looked at the affects of singing on several population groups such as: homeless male amateur singers (Bailey & Davidson, 2003), prison inmates (Cohen, 2009; Silber, 2005), intergenerational choirs (Cusicanqui & Salmon, 2004), and different age groups such as the elderly (Hillman, 2002), undergraduate students (Jacob, Guptill, & Sumsion, 2009), adolescents (Parker, 2011), as well as those with diagnosed conditions such as adults with mental illness (Dingle, Brander, Ballantyne, & Baker, 2012; Eyre, 2011), patients with cancer or chronic pain (Kenny & Faunce, 2004; Young, 2005), and individuals with eating disorders (Pavlakou, 2009).

Bailey and Davidson (2003) interviewed homeless men who had experienced positive life transformations since joining a community choir. Based on these interviews and a review of literature on the benefits of singing, they found that participation in a choir cultivated “emotional awareness, agency, belonging, meaning, and coherence” (p. 27), and believed that participation in group singing had helped to increase life satisfaction, overall health, and positive outcomes (Bailey & Davidson, 2003). Positive emotional effects of singing, such as energy, relaxation, emotional release, and joy, were found to be similar for their participants irrespective of training or social status. Therefore, this study supported that choir singing can be beneficial for any population, particularly to promote social-emotional health.

Cohen (2009) discovered several areas of benefit for male prison inmates performing in choral singing. This quantitative study investigated the benefits of choir singing for inmates

using *The Friedman Well-Being Scale* (FWBS) to measure emotional stability, sociability, joviality, self-esteem, and happiness. The results showed that participants had positive choir-related responses and experienced improvement for sociability, joviality, emotional stability, and happiness after a choir performance. Silber (2005) also explored the impact of choir singing with prison inmates, specifically the potential of choir singing to address the therapeutic needs of female inmates in an Israeli prison. Silber (2005) explained that a choir was selected because of its therapeutic properties to exercise interpersonal skills, improving self-esteem, and overall health. It was also seen as an activity that required a balance of personal skills, such as “self-control, patience, ‘finding’ one’s voice, self-expression, intuition”, and relational skills, such as “listening, yielding, trusting, sharing, and supporting” (Silber, 2005, p. 254). These skills could all help to contribute to creating an environment of cooperation and harmony within a diverse group. Through participation in the choir the inmates revealed a sense of unity and group cohesion, increased sensitivity and listening skills, better communication skills, greater self-control, enhanced trust and group support, as well as a sense of empowerment and raised self-esteem (Silber, 2005). As was the case with Bailey and Davidson’s (2003) study, these two studies suggest the universality of the benefits of choir singing for diverse populations.

The sense of community/social bonding was also present in research with other populations. For example, Cusicanqui and Salmon (2004) explained how they “develop[ed] and implement[ed] an intergenerational singing group” (p. 189) that included both seniors and children singing together. In the paper they discussed how strong bonds were made between choir members through the process and how some insight into the value of group work was discovered. Though the focus of this program was more on the process of group work than the actual group singing experience, findings showed the positive impacts of working together

towards a common goal and the relationships that could develop as a result of participation in a choir.

As was shown in Cusicanqui and Salmon's (2004) intergenerational choir, group singing has been found to be beneficial for different age groups ranging from children to the elderly. Hillman (2002) found several physical, emotional, social, and cultural benefits for elderly participants in group singing. Hillman (2002) conducted a questionnaire survey with seventy-nine participants over the age of sixty who participated in a singing project. Hillman (2002) mentioned that "despite the high recorded incidence of illness and bereavement", which was to be expected for individuals at that age, participants showed improvements in their "quality of life, emotional wellbeing, and understanding of singing" (p. 163) due to their participatory singing.

Jacob (2009) investigated the experiences of university choir members, specifically looking at their motivation for continuing their involvement in group singing. Nine university student participants were interviewed using a semi-structured format. The results from this qualitative study revealed four overarching themes associated with the reasons choir members continued to participate in leisure-based choir. The four themes included "previous musical experience, experienced a sense of community and social bonding, desired personal and group accomplishment, and felt that being in a choir offered stress relief and improved mood" (Jacob, 2009, p. 187). The previous music experience theme referred to the fact that previous musical experiences during elementary or high school had influenced all of the participants to join and continue involvement in that particular choir. The sense of community and social bonding theme showed that most of the participants looked forward to the social aspects of choir and enjoyed spending time with the other choir members since they were "like-minded people" (Jacob, 2009,

p. 189), creating a sense of community. The theme of accomplishment revealed that participants shared a desire for the choir to do well and that they enjoyed the choir experience more when “the choir’s sound was of high quality” (Jacob, 2009, p.189). Finally the participants of this study found the experience of participating in the choir to be an outlet that helped to reduce their levels of stress (stress relief).

Parker (2011) investigated the beliefs of adolescent choral singers about music making through interviews with eighteen participants. There were four emergent themes from this qualitative research, which included: “music making as simultaneously feelingful, musical knowing as interpersonal knowing, music as expressed feeling, and music making as enlightening” (Parker, 2011, p. 308). Participants described group singing as a place where emotions could be expressed, and where there was a feeling of intimacy and connection with one another. They also mentioned that music making in a group setting was uplifting and seemed to promote choir members overall wellbeing.

Other recent studies on specific populations were found looking at the benefits of choir singing for adults with mental illness, chronic pain, as well as cancer patients and women with eating disorders. Qualitative research by Dingle, Brander, Ballantyne, and Baker (2012) explored the social and mental health benefits of choir singing for adults living with a chronic mental illness or disability. They conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-one participants to explore their personal experiences as choir members. Three themes emerged from the data: personal impact, social impact, and functional outcomes. Participants in Dingle et al.’s (2012) study described experiencing positive emotions, improved self perception and singing ability, a spiritual impact, a feeling of connectedness both within the choir and with the audience, improved social functioning and work capacity, as well as helping to create routine and structure

in daily life through their participation in choir singing. Dingle et al. (2012) also described choir singing as a supported activity for individuals with mental illness to have the opportunity for “meaningful activity and social connectedness” (p. 1) that was less frequently found for these individuals and that helped to reduce emotional flattening and/or social isolation. Eyre (2011) also investigated the benefits of choir singing for sixteen adults diagnosed with major mental illness. Participants of this quantitative study completed a quality of life questionnaire, which was designed by the researchers. The results were similar to those of Dingle et al. (2012) and other research previously discussed. Eyre (2011) also found that participants perceived increases in “self-esteem, [an outlet for] emotional expression, mood alteration, coping with stress, comfort level within the group, and the establishment of a regular routine” (p. 149).

Based on clinical observations and a review of the literature, Young (2005) advocated the use of community singing groups for patients with cancer due to choir singing’s ability to improve their overall health and quality of life. Young (2005) reviewed literature on psychosocial support groups for cancer patients and the benefits of singing and concluded that the use of choir singing could be an effective tool to help in the treatment process of individuals with cancer. Young’s review of the literature (2005) found that singing can help to alleviate suffering, improve mood, allows self-expression, and may even prolong survival rates as was found in other psychosocial support groups. Kenny and Faunce (2004) found similar benefits for patients suffering from chronic pain who participated in group singing. Kenny and Faunce (2004) found that compared with participants in a music listening group, chronic pain patients who participated in the singing intervention had increased active coping skills, though these results were not statistically significant. They also had “lower levels of tension, depression, fatigue, and anger” (p. 252); however, the lowered levels were also shown in comparison groups

who listened to singing. Therefore further investigation into any differences between listening to versus participating in singing was suggested.

Pavlaou (2009) looked specifically at the possible benefits of participation in group singing for women with eating disorders. Through semi-structured interviews, data were collected showing four main categories related to the benefits of group singing for this population. The four areas identified by Pavlaou (2009) suggested that group singing created benefits from the singing experience itself, changes of self perception through the experience, benefits from the group experience, and other benefits in everyday life for the participants of this study. Participating in group singing helped to direct participants' attention "away from the self and eating-related issues" (Pavlaou, 2009, p. 37), allowed an outlet for self-expression, created an environment for social engagement and a feeling of belonging, and also helped participants to learn strategies that could be applied to other daily situations to reduce stress.

Several studies were found which have expanded research on the benefits of choir singing to address specific populations. These studies have generated useful data suggesting that choir singing was beneficial for all the populations included. There was a mixture of qualitative and quantitative studies, though most were qualitative. Some of the studies (e.g., Silber, 2005) showed that choir singing could be used as a helpful intervention tool, but due to the specific populations targeted there were no randomized samples and smaller sample sizes were used. Though one study was found looking at the benefits for adolescent choral singers (Parker, 2011), most studies focussed on adult choir singers. Therefore, more research on the benefits of choir singing for youth would be beneficial to extend knowledge in this area. There were also only two studies on choir singing for adults with mental illness (Dingle et al., 2012; Eyre, 2011), and few studies were found on children or youth with exceptionalities. This population had not yet

been investigated in relation to choir singing. In order to look for other relevant existing literature for the current study, a search for studies related to inclusive choir singing was conducted.

Inclusive Choirs / Group Activities

Though the practice of inclusive choir singing is becoming more prominent in both schools and community programs, only two research studies were found that discussed inclusive choir singing. Haywood (2006) investigated how the process of inclusive choirs created change in an individual with a physical exceptionality. A case study was conducted using semi-structured interviews and follow-up observations of a 15-year old inclusive choir member with a physical exceptionality. The primary research question guiding this study was: “How does the process of including an individual with special needs in choir create change in that individual?” (Haywood, 2006, p. 407). The results showed that the participant gained an identity as a “‘musician’ within the context of the identity as ‘choir member’” (p. 407) because of the teen’s participation in the inclusive choir. Follow-up interviews were conducted with the participant to ensure accuracy of the interpretations and conclusions made by the researcher. In this study the process of choir singing helped the participant to develop a shared identity with the other choir members, as they all became better musicians. However, this participant had to advocate for herself in order to be included in a choir setting like this one, showing some of the many barriers for individuals with special needs. For the participant in Haywood’s (2006) study these barriers included institutional barriers (e.g., school or venue did not have accessibility for a wheelchair), bias and fears of teachers and other students (e.g., the choir director was nervous about how much extra help would be needed to get her on and off the stage), as well as physical barriers due to her exceptionality (e.g., she could not stand up).

The case study discussed above was the only study found that related specifically to the benefits of inclusive choirs for youth with exceptionalities. However, Merkt (2012) recently worked with an inclusive choir for adults and presented ideas for inclusive choirs and the reflections of choir members on their experiences. This study was conducted as part of the Dortmunder Modell project (DOMO), which is “committed to realizing the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities” for the development and encouragement of “cultural participation, relevant both for people with and without disabilities” (p. 93). Choir members ranged in age from 22 to 60 and about one third of the choir members had some form of exceptionality. Merkt (2012) discussed six areas of *criteria* which are relevant to the success of any choir, but particularly for inclusive choirs including: “choral sound, vocal and rhythmical training, body percussion, movement, sheet music, and the repertoire” (p. 95). For each criteria area, Merkt (2012) explained how it applied to the needs of inclusive choirs. Suggestions were also given on how to work with the challenges associated within each area related to a diverse population. For example, when working with an inclusive choir it would not be realistic to expect to create a “traditional choral sound, even if a lot of voice training during the rehearsals [was] offered”, so more attention should be given to “what kind of music can be produced with the singers given” (Merkt, 2012, p. 95). Another tip was to instruct using language that all choir members could understand and follow. At the end of this journal article, the reflections of *typical* choir members were shared. Their reactions showed that despite past experiences working with individuals with exceptionalities, several choir members still had several prejudices and uncertainties which enforce “how important it [was] to provide contacts between people with different abilities and competencies” (Merkt, 2012, p. 99) through inclusive activities such as choir singing.

Despite little research being done on inclusive choir singing, the theoretical rationale for inclusive activities has been well established. Individuals with exceptionalities are often excluded from activities and “do not feel a sense of belonging” (Abery et al., 2003, p. 2). Therefore inclusive group activities may help to create an opportunity to meet people with similar interests, develop social relationships, as well as increase a sense of community and belonging. Abery et al. (2003) published a feature issue focusing on the benefits of social inclusion for individuals with exceptionalities. This feature issue addressed the fact that though many individuals with exceptionalities work with or participate in activities along with people who are not disabled, there is often “little social connection to and few friendships with those around them” (p. 1). The issue’s articles included personal stories, benefits of social inclusion, and strategies to help promote inclusive recreational activities in our communities. Specifically Abery et al. (2003) suggested that one way to promote social inclusion was for individuals with and without disabilities to play/spend time together participating in recreational programs, based on the personal stories included in the article.

With this rationale in mind, further research into the benefits of inclusive activities would help to promote social inclusion and more inclusive recreational activities in the community. As mentioned earlier, past research revealed several health benefits due to participation in group singing. Research has also covered several different populations and their experiences with group singing. However, only one case study (Haywood, 2006) has looked at youth with exceptionalities, and furthermore, research has yet to be done looking specifically at inclusive choir groups for youth. The lack of literature and research in this area shows the need to further explore this topic through research such as this thesis. This study is meant to answer the question

of: What perceived benefits and challenges have youth with exceptionalities and their families experienced based on their participation and involvement in an inclusive choir?

The following chapter will explore the methods used for this study in pursuit of furthering understanding about this topic.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The following chapter presents the research methodology. After introducing qualitative research and the use of a constructivist paradigm, Merriam's research approach of basic interpretive inquiry is outlined. The details of recruitment, data collection and analysis follow, as well as special consideration given the population being recruited and interviewed. Strategies for increasing the study's trustworthiness are explained and ethical considerations conclude the chapter.

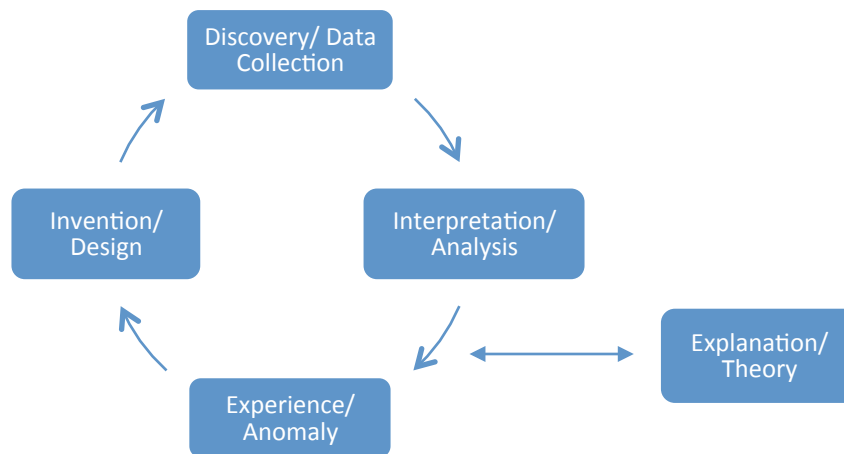
Qualitative Research and Constructivist Paradigm

This study involved qualitative research methodology anchored in a constructivist framework. Constructivism is appropriate when researchers want to understand the meaning of a phenomenon or experience for individuals involved (Merriam, 2002, p. 37). A constructivist perspective views meaning as something that "is not discovered, but constructed" (Merriam, 2002, p. 37) by human beings as they engage and interact with the world.

Crabtree and Miller (1999) suggested that most qualitative inquiry fits into inquiry cycles illustrated by the Shiva's Circle of Constructivist Inquiry. Shiva is the Hindu god of dance and death, so by extension, the implication is that while interpreting and explaining the meaning of findings, the qualitative researcher must "be faithful to the dance but also stand apart from it" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 60). From the constructivist perspective, there is no ultimate truth, only "context-bound constructions that are all a part of the larger universe of stories" (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p. 10). As seen below, the Shiva's Circle of Constructivist Inquiry involves four stages of ongoing discovery and interpretation within which the research project may begin at any point. These stages include: experience/anomaly, invention/design, discovery/data collection, and interpretation/analysis. Experience/Anomaly means that the

researcher looks critically at the experience or phenomenon of interest and the factors that influence it. Invention/Design refers to the researcher's curiosity about the phenomenon, which in turn aids in the formation of a research design and choices of how to collect data.

Discovery/Data collection is the stage of actually conducting the investigation and gathering data through one or several methods such as interviews and observation. Interpretation/Analysis refers to looking at the data collected and generating interpretations of the participant's meaning and actions. Explanation/Theory also accompanies this cycle. This fifth stage exists outside of the cycle, and refers to the researchers' attempt to understand and explain their interpretation and analysis of the data to inform further research on the topic of interest (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The following diagram shows *Figure 4.1: Shiva's Circle of Constructivist Inquiry* (Adapted from Marshall & Rossman, 2011):



According to Guba and Lincoln (2005), the epistemological assumptions of constructivism lead to transactional, subjectivist, and co-created findings. That is, there is an interactive link made between researcher and participants. They go on to explain that in taking a constructivist

approach, the views of each participant are valued as unique and equally important in understanding the phenomenon.

Qualitative research is often informed by constructivist assumptions. Chenail (2011) characterized qualitative research as “naturalistic, subjective, inductive, ideographic, and descriptive/interpretive inquiry” (p. 1713). There are different approaches to qualitative research, each with a particular focus. For example, phenomenology seeks to illuminate lived experience; narrative inquiry focuses on stories; and grounded theory aims to inductively generate explanatory models. There are commonalities across each particular approach and these commonalities have been used in identifying generic approaches to qualitative research. Basic interpretive qualitative research is one such approach.

Basic Interpretive Design

Merriam (2002) described basic interpretive qualitative research as incorporating characteristics common to all qualitative research. A key characteristic in the researcher’s interest is better understanding of participants’ worldviews and how they make meaning of a particular situation or phenomenon. Constructivism underlies Merriam’s basic interpretive approach in that the central characteristic is the belief that individuals “construct reality in interaction with their social worlds” (Merriam, 2002, p. 37).

In a basic interpretive study, the researcher is viewed as the main instrument of data collection and is described as being interested in three main areas:

1. How individuals interpret their [surroundings and] experiences
2. How people construct their world and,
3. What meaning they attribute to [these] experiences (Merriam, 2002, p.38).

Thus the overall purpose of the basic interpretive approach is driven by a constructivist viewpoint in hopes of better understanding “how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (Merriam, 2002, p. 38).

Procedures

Recruitment and Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants knowledgeable and experienced with the phenomenon of singing in an inclusive choir. Purposeful sampling is the process in which the participants are selected purposefully based on prior knowledge, uniqueness, and relevance to the study, instead of being randomly selected by the researcher (Schwandt, 2001).

This study included six semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted with fourteen participants, including: parents, choir directors, and a choir manager, as well as choir singers with exceptionalities and one typical choir member who was the sibling of a choir member with an exceptionality. Parent involvement was helpful in better understanding responses from choir members during the interview process and their experiences being involved with the inclusive choir. (The rationale behind the decision to include parents, siblings, and other stakeholders in the study will be further discussed later in this chapter.) The interviews were used to gather firsthand perspectives from each of the participants. Due to their different roles and involvement within the choir experience, a richer understanding was made possible. The criteria that was used for purposeful recruitment of the youth included: youth choir members who have a diagnosed exceptionality (physical or intellectual), aged 10-18 years, who have participated in choir within the last year, and have the skills to express themselves verbally. This ability to express themselves verbally was based on their ability to respond to the interview questions or have a parent/guardian participate in the interview with them. The criteria for the second group

of participants was: parent/guardians, or other family members (e.g. siblings) of youth choir members who understood and spoke English sufficiently to participate in an interview, and had a child who was participating in an inclusive choir. Thirdly, other stakeholders, such as choir directors and choir managers, of inclusive choir groups met the criteria to participate in this study.

Participants were recruited by putting up posters and providing information to directors of inclusive choirs to see if anyone from their choir might be interested in participating. (Please see Appendix A for a copy of the recruitment poster used.) The majority of participants were recruited through the help of choir directors passing along information about the study for any interested families. As a result, all fourteen participants who contributed to this study were involved in some way with the same inclusive choir. They volunteered their time to participate and graciously shared their personal experiences during semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews. In participant observation, the researcher gathers data while engaging in firsthand involvement in the environment chosen for the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Participant observation offers a unique opportunity to gather data about the setting, participant behaviour, and interactions. Observation of a sixty-minute choir rehearsal was focused on the interactions between choir members, as well as the interactions between choir directors and choir members. Watching for facial expressions, body posture, laughter, and side-talk was all taken into consideration when observing the choir rehearse. Later observation of a ninety-minute performance was done focussing on the reactions of the audience members. Watching for facial expressions, body posture, audience members singing along, and reactions at the end of each

song. Pen and paper were used to make notes of observations. These two observations provided further insight into the workings/logistics of the inclusive choir and experiences that the interview participants had shared in the semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews use an interview guide or topical approach to interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Semi-structured interviews allowed further exploration of the experiences and perspectives of participants. (Please refer to Appendix C to see the interview guide used.) This approach allowed for a more informal discussion about the research with flexibility to follow the participant's lead if a topic of interest came up while still maintaining some guidance from the researcher's questions when needed. Using semi-structured interviews was most appropriate for this study as it allowed the researcher preparation with some questions but the format also allowed the interview process some flexibility as the conversation progressed (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Each of the fourteen participants engaged in a forty-five to ninety minute interview with the researcher. Group interviews tended to be longer (sixty to ninety minutes) than the individual interviews (forty-five to sixty minutes), as more participant perspectives were being gathered. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed in their entirety.

It was important to approach data collection in a way that would allow participants informed consent and comfort working with the researcher. This was especially a concern when working with youth with exceptionalities. Elder and Fingerson (2002) suggested using focus groups or small interview groups when interviewing youth. This allows adolescents to bounce ideas off each other and may aid in reducing the influence or sense of authority of an adult researcher in the data collection process (Elder & Fingerson, 2002). As a result, the option of family interviews or small group interviews for youth choir members was given to participants.

The logic behind this was that the youth and their family members may feel more comfortable about participating in the study and be more open to sharing their thoughts and perspectives with the researcher as a result. In this way participants could choose the setting that was most comfortable for them if they were interested in getting involved in the study. If choir members were not able to communicate verbally, parents who were interested in participating were able to do so and talk on their child's behalf about their family's experience with the choir. Parents had helpful insights about their child's participation in the choir. (See Appendix B for participant consent form and Appendix C for the interview guide)

Data Analysis

Inductive data analysis was used throughout the data collection process. Inductive analysis involves beginning with specific data collected and eventually moving to a more general conclusion based on the research findings (Schwandt, 2001). Data were collected through individual and in some cases group interviews, as well as observations of a choir rehearsal and performance. All interviews were fully audiotaped and transcribed. Field notes were also converted to an electronic format. Next, the transcripts and field notes were coded using the constant comparative method. Schwandt (2001) defined the constant comparative method as:

A method for analyzing qualitative data in the form of field notes, observations, interviews, and the like are coded inductively, and then each segment of the data is taken in turn and (a) compared to one or more categories to determine its relevance and (b) compared with other segments of data similarly categorized. As segments are compared, new analytic categories and relationships between categories may be discovered, (p. 30)

This method aided in generating overarching themes as they were identified from the data collected. To allow easy organization of transcripts and coding of data for analysis, categorical charts were used. This provided an organizational system for data, which was very helpful for the interpretation and analysis phase of research.

Before analyzing the data, participants were contacted to allow them to look over the transcript and confirm researcher understanding of the data thus far. This process, known as member checking, involves getting feedback from participants for “corroboration or verifying findings” in order to ensure that they are “valid and meet the criterion of confirmability” (Schwandt 2001, p. 155).

Evaluation Criteria for Trustworthiness of Qualitative Research

When preparing to conduct qualitative research it is important to consider the quality and trustworthiness of the current study. Morrow (2005) discussed paradigm-specific criteria for determining trustworthiness of data including: subjectivity and reflexivity, adequacy of data, and adequacy of interpretation. Specific to the constructivist paradigm, Morrow (2005) also provided certain authenticity criteria, which includes “fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity” (p. 252). These criteria for determining trustworthiness of data are further explored in the following sections.

Subjectivity and Reflexive Bracketing

In order to avoid undue influence of the researcher’s personal ideals, values, and assumptions, reflexive bracketing was used. Bracketing is the process of “becoming aware of one’s implicit assumptions and predispositions, and setting them aside to avoid having them unduly influence the research” (Morrow, 2005, p. 254). However, as Morrow (2005) mentioned, this approach assumes that one can fully know themselves. Personally, I do not feel that this is entirely possible as there are always more self-discovery and insights to be made. Therefore finding an outlet for self-reflection and being open about those discoveries throughout the research process can be used to address researcher influence and subsequent perspectives on data collection and analysis.

Researcher reflexivity is said to help to “provide an opportunity for the researcher to understand how one’s own experiences and understanding of the world affect the research process” (Morrow, 2005, p. 253). Ahern (1999) defined reflexivity as one’s ability to “put aside personal feelings and preconceptions” and researchers’ ability to “realize that they are part of the social world that they study” (p. 408). In order to better understand my own experiences, meaning making processes, and observations during the research process, regular meeting with my supervisor were made to debrief. This was helpful in the self-reflection process and offered an outlet to consult about the research and at times “serve as a devil’s advocate” by “proposing alternative interpretations” (Morrow, 2005, p. 254).

Another aspect of reflexivity and subjectivity that must be taken into consideration is that of representation of the participant’s reality within the research. When approaching this study from a constructivist perspective, I was seeking to better understand and describe the participants’ experiences and ways of meaning making from these experiences and their environment. However, through the interview process the interactions of participant and researcher would shape both what they chose to share about their experiences and my understanding of it. Therefore the difficulty, if not impossibility, of separating the researcher from the researched in fairly representing participant experiences and trying to see and relay information from the participants’ perspectives, instead of from my own as an outsider was addressed (Morrow, 2005). Participant checks were done to ensure that what is included in the transcripts from interviews reflected the participants’ meaning and what was expressed during the interview process.

Adequacy of Data Collection

To ensure sufficient richness of data collected, the number of participants recruited for this study remained open. Though the anticipated number of participants for this study was about five to ten people, it was open to more participants as needed for continued sampling determined by the judgment of a point where additional data collection and analysis no longer contributes any new information. The final number of participants in this study ended up being fourteen as this was the point where it was felt by the researcher that sufficient richness of data had been collected. The quality of data collected may also depend on the participants' ability to articulate their thoughts clearly to the researcher. Choice of language and vocabulary used in the interview questions was carefully chosen to be age appropriate for youth participants to be able to understand and respond to the questions. This helped to get the richest data from youth participants as possible. Further discussion of ethical considerations and protection of participants will be included in the following ethics section.

Ethical Considerations

General considerations were attended to and approval sought through the University of Saskatchewan Ethics Committee. An application for behavioural research ethics review was completed to ensure proper precautions were planned for before beginning recruitment or data collection. This ethics application required the researcher to consider any conflicts of interest, estimate the risks and benefits of participation, address the informed consent process, and discuss plans for recruitment and data collection. Ethics application approval was received on June 22, 2012 (BEH #12-170).

The only possible conflict of interest for the researcher related to this study was the possibility of prior relationships with potential participants due to past work at Camp Easter Seal.

However, it was not anticipated that any prior counsellor-camper relationships would negatively influence participants in any way. If anything, such relationships were envisioned as assisting the interview process, as rapport will already have been established between the researcher and participant. To ensure participant protection and reduce any feelings of pressure to take part, it was conveyed to all participants that their participation was voluntary for both the observation and interview portion of the data collection. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any point until the completion of the final manuscript.

In addition, I kept a researcher journal to make notes about observations, impressions, reflexive bracketing, and analysis of data as the study progresses. During the interviews an audio recorder was used so that conversation could flow more naturally without the researcher trying to keep up writing everything down. Consent for the audio taping was included in the consent forms and participants were informed that they could ask for the recorder to be turned off at any point if it made them feel too uncomfortable.

Informed consent about the potential risks and benefits of the study and participant rights was presented to participants prior to beginning the interview process. Consent was requested from both the parents/guardians of choir members as well as from the youth themselves. This allowed participants the opportunity to ask any questions they had about the research process. At this point participants were also informed that after the interviews were transcribed, they would be given the opportunity to review the transcript and provide additional information or request changes they would like to be made to the transcript. In this way participants could be involved in the research process and have a say in what they were okay with having included in the research from their interview. Participants were asked to sign a data release (see Appendix B) form for the research findings to be used in this thesis and possibly shared at research

conferences or in a peer reviewed journal article. Participants were also given the opportunity to get information about the research results if they are interested.

Interviewing Youth with Exceptionalities

Interviewing youth with exceptionalities raised several ethical concerns, some specific to being youth and some as a result of the exceptionality. These ethical concerns include the power dynamic between researcher and participant, concerns around participant stamina during the interview process, participant safety and comfort, as well as the ability of participants to express themselves clearly. As such, it was critical that the proper precautions were taken throughout the research process.

The main ethical concern when interviewing children or youth is the power dynamic between researcher and participant. Though the power dynamic between interviewer and participant is always a concern, children and youth are viewed as a socially disadvantaged group, due to their age and position in society, creating a larger power gap between the researcher and researched (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). This may result in coercion. Eder and Fingerson (2002) suggested strategies to help researchers be sensitive to the power imbalance and do what they can to reduce the adult researcher power in order to give voice to the participant's interpretations and thoughts. These suggestions included use of multiple methods, such as interview and observation, providing the opportunity for focus group interviews combined with individual interviews, and using direct quotes so that the language reflects what participants expressed during interviews (Eder & Fingerson, 2002).

Another area of concern when working with youth with exceptionalities is participant stamina, safety, and comfort in the interview process. As discussed earlier, precautions were taken to ensure participant comfort such as allowing the option of family or small group

interviews. This aided in youth comfort working with the researcher, as well as helping to put parents/guardians' minds at ease if they wanted to be present. Going into the interviews, there were concerns that participants may become tired during the interview process. Therefore interviews were kept short (around thirty to sixty minutes) to allow participants to maintain their focus and energy for the entirety of the interview. None of the participants expressed any concerns about stamina but they were all given the option to stop the interview if they wanted to and offered that a second interview could be scheduled if needed. Participants were also not required to answer every question or discuss topics that made them uncomfortable or stressed.

Finally the ability for participants to articulate their thoughts and express their perspectives on the topic was of utmost priority. If participants could not express themselves verbally or needed accommodations to be made in order to get their ideas across to the researcher, the participation of a parent/guardian was requested or appropriate alterations were suggested to support participants who wished to participate. For example, in a case where a youth participant had limited speech abilities, parents were asked to participate in the interview to aid communication between the youth and researcher. Three group interviews with parents and youth choir members were included in the current study. With a couple of the youth participants it was difficult to understand what they were saying at times due to speech impairments, lack of vocabulary, and/or difficulties verbalizing their thoughts. Therefore having parents present was helpful for the research to ensure comprehension of what the youth participants were trying to explain.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this chapter the results of the semi-structured interviews and observations are presented. First the participants who contributed to this study are introduced. Then the overarching themes that were identified through analysis of the participant transcripts are discussed and linked with supporting quotations from participants. In order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, quotations were changed to eliminate or alter specific names used by participants, and pseudonyms are used. The themes are discussed, followed by the results of the observations of a choir rehearsal and performance. Finally the themes and results are reviewed and discussed further to end the chapter.

Interview Participants

Fourteen participants were recruited through distribution of posters and by contacting choir directors of inclusive choirs. They included five mothers of choir members, one father, five choir members (four with exceptionalities and one *typical* choir member) ranging in age from ten to eighteen, two choir directors, and one choir manager. Several of the participants recruited had exceptionalities themselves, or were the parents of choir members with exceptionalities such as: autism spectrum disorder, Down's syndrome, cerebral palsy, and pervasive developmental disorder. Two individual interviews, and four group interviews were conducted. Each interview was between forty-five to ninety minutes long. As explained in Chapter 3, participants were given the option of doing a group interview and these group interviews were often longer (sixty to ninety minutes) so that each participant had an opportunity to share their experiences. A brief description of the participants will be presented here in order to better understand who they were and the interview process used.

The first participant (Kathy) to be interviewed was a mother of a choir member in an inclusive choir and also a choir director of her own inclusive choir. Her daughter had been involved in the choir as a typical member (without an exceptionality) for several years. They got involved after a recommendation from the parent of another choir member and found it to be a very beneficial experience for her daughter. The following quote illustrates some of the benefits Kathy had seen for her daughter through her participation in an inclusive choir:

This is a good opportunity for her to have some experiences where she can be a leader and she can help others, and she can grow that capacity in herself.

Kathy also mentioned that she feels her daughter now has a broader view of who she sees as having a disability because of how the choir is “set up, because they’re all just included and they are getting to know each other” in a way that is “more about having genuine relationships.”

The second participant (Veronica) interviewed was also a mother of a choir member in an inclusive choir. Her son has an exceptionality and they have been involved in an inclusive choir for five years now. Much like Kathy they decided to join the choir based on the recommendation from a parent of another choir member. She has found this experience to be very beneficial for her son, particularly in improving his speech abilities, and sees:

benefits, especially speech wise, because his speech isn’t very good. We know what he is saying but you probably wouldn’t.

and developing friendships:

Through choir there is one little girl that we know, her brother is the same age as [my older son], and they go to school together too, so we’ve gotten to know her.

The third interview was a group interview with participants three, four, and five (Barb, Maxine, Deb). They were two choir directors and the manager of inclusive choirs. Barb started her inclusive choir eight years ago after meeting a mother of a girl with an exceptionality that

had negative experiences in school choirs but loved to sing. This story and other personal experiences inspired her to start an inclusive choir where all children who love to sing could come and sing together. Over the last eight years the choir has grown and developed into a sustainable program and since so many children wanted to continue singing, as they got too old for the choir, a second choir has been developed for older youth. The second choir director, Deb, is currently the director of this older inclusive youth choir. She first got involved because she is the sister of the other choir director, her children participated in the choir, and when the need arose for an older group she agreed to take on being the choir director. The choir manager, Maxine, has been involved with the group for several years. She is the grandmother of a choir member and when a new manager was needed she volunteered to take on that role. All three women have found the experience very rewarding, and spoke of the uniqueness and importance of these two groups in the community:

The whole point of us being together is not to make the most perfect music obviously, but it's about being together, communicating with one another, and making something really special that everybody can appreciate and be a part of.

The fourth interview was with a mother (Mandy) and her two daughters (Rose and Lisa), one of which has an exceptionality. Both girls participate in an inclusive choir together and have been involved in the group for almost eight years. They were approached by one of the founders of the group and have been a part of it ever since. Both girls have enjoyed being a part of this group, have developed friendships, as well as confidence as performers, and in their musical abilities. They have found the choir to have an “atmosphere [that] is always friendly and fun, and that makes them always want to go back every year.”

The fifth interview was also a group interview with a family. The mother (Trista), father (Andrew), son (Kyle), and daughter (Zoey) were involved in an inclusive choir. The two

children both had exceptionalities and had been involved in the choir for about three years now. Both children have developed friendships with other choir members, learned more about acceptance and understanding social cues, and improved breathing abilities. As a family they have also found the inclusive choir experience to be a wonderful experience and learning environment as is seen in the following quote:

I like it, music is sort of a connector regardless of who you are. It can calm moods and settle situations, and change behaviours. It's a good learning environment for the kids.

The sixth and final interview was conducted with a mother (Marly) and her son (George). He has an exceptionality and has been involved in the choir for eight years now. Participation in the choir has resulted in significant improvements to his speech and "confidence booster." They have also found that the choir has enabled him to be exposed to many different genres of music. They also mentioned that:

Some great friendships have evolved as a result of the choir. They see each other every week and they look forward to seeing each other once a week.

The following sections of this chapter will discuss the themes based on the data collected from these semi-structured interviews.

The Health Benefits of Inclusive Choir Singing

I'd have to say that at least for the kids with disabilities, for most of them the reason they keep coming back is that there is no other place that they're getting this kind of experience. They feel fulfilled and noticed for their accomplishments.

- Barb

All of the participants interviewed shared what they observed as the health and wellbeing benefits for choir members with exceptionalities of participating in an inclusive choir. The benefits mentioned have been grouped into four categories: physical, cognitive, emotional, and social benefits.

Physical Benefits

Several of the participants mentioned that they have seen or experienced physical benefits and improvements as a result of their, or their child's, participation in an inclusive choir. For example, Trista mentioned that they have seen significant improvements for their daughter. Zoey's breathing has improved since joining the choir, which helped to eliminate her sleep apnoea completely:

She has sleep apnoea, and one of the questions we asked the doctor was how can we help her take longer [breaths], because she's a shallow breather, so what are some exercises to help her. And they suggested singing! And we don't have to have [her] on the CPAP machine anymore. We were told we can take [her] of it.

Other participants mentioned that they had noticed improvements in speech due to the singing.

For example, Marly explained:

Well just the speech thing has been huge because with singing you have to fill up your lungs and round out your words and everything. The practicing over and over has been good for his speech.

Through their experience in choir, choir members also learned skills that have improved their posture. For example, Kyle and Zoey explained how to stand properly when singing:

Zoey: You stand with your hands straight, not crooked

Kyle: On the sides of your body. Well they should be relaxed otherwise making yourself stand like a soldier, or making yourself skinny. You still need to fill the space.

Another area related to physical health that Kathy had noticed was increased physical engagement. She explained that many of the choir members with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) had improved their physical engagement with others due to their involvement in the inclusive choir:

It seems like the kids are a lot more physically, developing that physical relationship and affection which I think has been really nice. Particularly, I guess I'm thinking of a couple kids with autism and one girl with fetal alcohol affect, for them that's been a really big benefit.

She went on to explain that they were more willing to be closer in proximity to others, and would even snuggle up to, or lay their heads on the educational assistants (EAs) during rehearsals.

All of the participants shared that through participation in the choir, the youth have experienced some form of physical health benefit. These included physical engagement, breathing, speech, and posture.

Cognitive Benefits

A couple of the participants discussed cognitive benefits as a result of participating in an inclusive choir. For example, Kathy had noticed that the youth seem to have increased focus and attention after choir rehearsal in that “you can usually see an increase in the next 20 to 40 minutes of their learning time.” Kathy had also noticed that the engagement in “lots of repetition” through choir has “increase[d] their learning and their memory” abilities. Therefore, singing in an inclusive choir was thought to increase cognitive abilities such as memory and attention, which in turn increased their academic performance/abilities to learn.

Emotional Benefits

Many of the improvements for choir members with exceptionalities, mentioned by participants, were related to emotional benefits due to inclusive choir singing. These included a sense of pride and purpose, as well as improved self-confidence and self-esteem. For example Deb expressed:

The sense of pride in having a goal. This is the goal, the sense of having something to look forward to, such as “you get to sing with [a professional guest musician].” There is sort of that driven-ness.

Barb also mentioned the sense of pride that choir members experience through their success in this environment, and self-discovery of their singing and performing talents:

It is a place to come where they can show off what their skills and interests are. And that’s got to be good for the soul, it’s got to be healthy. It may even be that some kids

didn't know they had this until they got in front of an audience, which for kids with disabilities, [they] almost never get that chance.

Other participants felt that participation in the choir had created a sense of purpose. For example, Veronica described the inclusive choir experience as being:

Probably good emotionally just to be involved in something and have a purpose and something to be going to every [week], he has choir. You know, just a purpose of something that is just for him.

Several of the participants shared that one of the main emotional impacts they have noticed is improved self-confidence, particularly as a performer. Mandy explained that she had seen this in her daughter Rose:

She has a self-confidence now that if you asked her to stand there and sing a song for you, she'd do it! Because she feels confident to do that, which I think she's gotten a lot of confidence. The first few years [the choir director] would give her a solo or something and she would say "My legs were just like shaking! My knees were shaking!" But she's getting a lot more comfortable doing that. She still gets a little nervous, but I mean nervous is ok, we all get a little nervous. She's not worried about "Am I going to forget my words", you know, it's given her a lot of confidence for sure.

Marly also shared that confidence had been an emotional improvement she had noticed in her son, George, due to his participation in the inclusive choir:

Just the confidence I think has been a big boost for him. [It's a] big confidence booster. Feeling good about yourself is always very positive.

When asked how he feels after a rehearsal, George exclaimed that he usually feels "really good."

Both parents and choir members themselves have therefore recognized the emotional benefits such as pride, sense of purpose, confidence, and improved mood due to their participation in an inclusive choir.

Social Benefits

When asked what was unique about this type of choir experience all the participants mentioned the social benefits such as the sense of community/ belonging and the friendships

developed. Not only was this the case for the choir members, but also for the choir families, directors, and manager. Although each participant had slightly different experiences, they all mentioned appreciating this about the choir. For example, Kathy mentioned:

I think it must really give them a sense of belonging and even that sense of fun and enjoying themselves.

Deb also mentioned this sense of belonging and camaraderie among the choir members:

Camaraderie is so big. Some of these kids know each other from school as well so they do have the opportunity to see each other outside of the choir. But when they come here it's just beautiful to see "Hi! How are you doing today?!" you know, it's all very wonderful and friendly and they really like each other.

Mandy spoke to the sense of belonging and that her despite her exceptionality, Rose has always felt welcomed and a part of the group:

She's a very happy kid. She's happy in the space she's in, she doesn't feel like she doesn't belong or anything like that. So the choir has always been a welcoming place, so it's not like she ever felt like she didn't belong there.

Marly also discussed the friendships that her son, George, has developed through choir:

Some great friendships have evolved as a result of the choir. They see each other once a week and they look forward to seeing each other once a week. So again in the disability community, that friendship thing is sometimes not an easy thing, and so that's another definite positive of the choir, has been the friendships that have resulted from it.

Several participants spoke to the fact that all those involved shared a common interest in music. For example, Mandy explained that for the choir members:

They all have that common interest of singing, you know wanting to sing, singing songs that are fun. They just have a lot of fun and have made a lot of friends.

When choir members were asked to explain what they enjoyed about choir they all discussed their love of singing and the friendships they have made. Kyle mentioned that his interest in singing was what convinced him to join the choir in the first place:

I always like to sing all the time, and I just thought I could be part of that so I'd know more about singing and some new songs.

George also mentioned his love of singing and appreciation for the friendships he had made through that experience:

I like to sing and the friendships that I make over the 18 weeks. I like the different kinds of music that we learn every year too.

It is evident that the choir members have really connected with one another and had an opportunity to develop friendships with peers who had similar interests in singing, within a very positive environment.

Some participants discussed that the inclusive choir has been beneficial in improving maladaptive behaviours, or helped their child with an exceptionality to better pick up on social cues. Trista and Andrew mentioned that their children have learned more about “turn taking and waiting for cues” thanks to their involvement with the choir. Maxine also mentioned the behavioural improvements in some of the choir members that she had observed:

Well I mean the one thing I’ve noticed too is I think that for some of the kids who might have behaviour problems, that working in the choir environment helps them kind of rub the pointy edges off that. You see people learning how to interact in a more acceptable way when they’re in the choir environment. They stop doing certain things and start doing other things, and their participation increases and they’re more focussed.

Therefore, the structured atmosphere of the inclusive choir has helped some of the choir members to learn to behave in more socially acceptable/appropriate ways.

Several of the participants also mentioned that the choir members have learned to have a broader understanding that everyone is unique and has different abilities, leading to a more general acceptance of others. Andrew expressed this by saying that he thought:

The benefit is the social interaction to a diverse group and understanding acceptance, learning, participating. Just that whole interaction is, to me, good. It helps them understand even the world better by understanding the differences and having to participate with people who have differences. Not only from a physical or ability perspective, different people have different interests regardless of their ability, or education, or character, demeanour, height, weight... I mean the world is a diverse place. So seeing this aspect I think is a good part of child development.

This was not only the case for choir members with exceptionalities, but also a benefit that participants had seen for the typical choir members. Kathy mentioned this about her daughter, who is a typical choir member:

It's interesting to see her idea of who in the choir is a typical child and who is a child with a disability. And I think that's one of the things I see as a benefit. I don't think she would even see it, but I see that who she sees as typical kids is much broader than my background that I know who are maybe some kids with a disability, she doesn't see as having a disability. So I would say that's a benefit of the choir and I don't know if that's because of how [the choir director] has it set up, because they're all just included and they are getting to know each other so it doesn't matter ... I think you know kids enjoy each other, I don't know what it is but I'd say that is definitely one of the benefits from my point of view.

Maxine also shared a touching story about choir member interactions that illustrated how they rely on and help each other:

They were rehearsing, and [she] would sometimes have these meltdowns and start to cry, and she couldn't seem to stop. So she was doing this, and she started to cry and the parent who was sitting up on the stage [to help out] had her come and sit on the benches at the back there, and she was just crying and crying, wouldn't stop. And then my granddaughter came over and said the magic words, which I don't think an adult would have thought of. She just said, "we need you to come help us sing" and [she] stopped crying and went. All the things the parent and I had said just didn't penetrate or have an effect, but the relationship with the children is just amazing to me. And it's not just [her], I just happened to be sitting there at the time and it really resonated with me, but you see it all the time. Where they'll take somebody's hand to help them walk up the steps... and it's just their natural way of behaving, nobody asks them to do it, they just do it.

Overall, participants of this study reported several areas of physical, cognitive, emotional, and social health as benefiting for all choir members, particularly those with exceptionalities, due to involvement in an inclusive choir. However, there were other positive aspects of participating in an inclusive choir that did not fit into the health benefits theme. These positive aspects are discussed in the following section.

Positive Aspects of Inclusive Choirs

I think it's a really good environment for kids who just want to sing and to have fun.

- Mandy

During the interviews all of the participants expressed things that they enjoyed about the inclusive choir and what made that experience unique. Though these include benefits of choir singing, they did not involve particular health benefits and therefore were categorized separately. Participants spoke of the opportunity for each member to have their “shining moment” in the spotlight, opportunities for learning through exposure to different genres of music and chances to sing with professional guest musicians at performances, and the impact they had noticed on the audience and community. Participants were also asked during the interviews if they would recommend the group to others and what they might tell people interested in joining an inclusive choir. The following section discusses their responses further.

Shining Moments

Another positive aspect of inclusive choir singing that participants mentioned was the opportunity for each choir member to have their moment in the spotlight. Several participants referred to this as a *shining moment* for the choir member and the parents watching it as well. They expressed an appreciation that they each youth's abilities are drawn on and highlighted through these opportunities. For example, Maxine explained that within an inclusive choir the idea of what a soloist is may be different from other choirs:

Everybody gets a chance to do a solo. That's the difference between being inclusive, and you know another sort of choir, we're making room and I think these other choirs are great, and that's what they need to do, but for our purposes this is so freeing!

Andrew also mentioned how in the inclusive choir the choir director draws on each individuals' strengths and gives the young people an opportunity to show off their talents:

There is a very diverse group of abilities, but yet [the choir director] draws from everybody's abilities and makes sure that they've got a role, from singing solos, to narrating, to singing in smaller groups. So they get the spotlight, and then the whole choir singing. So you get that feeling of me, but also community in the program.

Several of the parents interviewed shared memories of shinning moments for them and their children when singing solos in choir performances. For example, Veronica told the story of her son's first solo:

I didn't tell anybody when he was going to be singing that solo. So when the kids went up to say what was happening next they said "and now our friend is going to sing his very first solo with our group"... and I was sitting behind, I had saved a pew for friends and I saw everybody sort of like "Oh wow [he's] going up!" So over he went to the microphone and he sang that out and I could see people dabbing their eyes, you know sheading a little tear, so that was a really good memory for me because I surprised them that he would be doing that... [I was] very proud!

Parents felt very proud of their children in moments like the one mentioned above. Participants also discussed the pride that the choir members felt when successfully performing a solo or duet.

Barb described a particular memory of a choir member's successful solo performance:

He has turned into this lovely young man and he's still pretty tricky to understand, but he got up and did a solo last year where he did the chorus of [a song] to start off the whole thing... you couldn't really understand the words, but you knew the tune, so you knew what he was singing, and he was doing sign language, well it wasn't exactly sign language, but the actions for the song. And he was not the least bit shy to be doing it, and he was so proud of himself to get up there and do it.

Watching choir members sing solos has also allowed parents a chance to see what their children were capable of, as was mentioned by Trista:

It's given us an opportunity to see what they can do, I mean had we not had them in the singing, I wouldn't have, you know you see a different side of your kids when [they are singing a solo] and I think [the choir director] gives you the chance to feel important and care free when you're up there.

Participants appreciated the inclusive choir philosophy of drawing on the strengths of each member, and letting them show it off. Marly acknowledged the choir director's ability to draw on each child's ability and highlight it in some way:

There have been so many different abilities and disabilities in the choir and she's been able to make these, each and everyone of these kids shine. She gives them each an opportunity in some way to make them feel really good about themselves during the show and for them to have their moment of fame. [My son]'s been able to be MC, has had a little solo here and there. [The choir director] seems to really have a knack at finding that little opportunity for each and every one of those kids so that they can have their little moment on stage where they just feel really proud of themselves. You can just see them beaming up there!

Learning New Things

Several of the participants said that one of the benefits of participating in choir was the opportunity to learn new things. For example they got exposure to so many different genres of music and had the chance to perform with professional guest musicians at concerts. Maxine described watching the choir members when they first got to sing with a vocal jazz group:

The looks on their faces when they realized "Oh My God we're singing jazz! This is jazz and we can do this!" You know it was just amazing to watch their eyes just open up big and you could see the energy.

Marly also shared her appreciation for the exposure of the choir members to different genres of music:

Another thing is that the choir has introduced them to a whole other world of music, different genres... I've noticed that this week [my son] has been listening to a lot of [country] songs. But that's kind of been a trend. So each concert has kind of opened up a whole new genre of music for them so their music world has expanded immensely. [Music] that they may not have listened to [if they] had not been introduced to it through the choir.

Contribution to the Community

Some of the participants also mentioned the impact that the inclusive choir has had on the audience and community when they perform. When performing, the choir members are given the opportunity to contribute something to the community and be the ones to give something back. For example, Marly described that the positive environment makes the choir members "feel good about themselves" and that they always receive "very positive feedback from the

community which is great.” Deb also expressed that she thought the inclusive choir experience really “gets to the root of music making” in that “it’s not about perfection” and that’s what makes it so different. Deb went on to explain that:

I think that’s why so many people that come for the first time are so amazed. Not only is it professional looking, they probably don’t expect all the movements and the practice that goes into that actual thing, but I think it’s just they don’t expect to leave with that pure joy sense. You can’t stop smiling because [your] face hurts, because [you’re] feeling so happy. It’s not like “oh that’s a lovely note, did you hear how they ended that line at the end and crescendo-ed?” you know, it’s so different than anything. It’s the root of it all.

Recommendation of Inclusive Choir to Others

Another commonality between participants was that they all said they would definitely recommend participation in inclusive choirs to others. The following are some examples of the responses participants gave when asked what they would say about the choir to others who might be interested in joining. Veronica shared that she had told others about the choir and expressed to them that:

This is just something to look at. It’s been a really good experience, so yes I would recommend it to others. It’s an outing, it’s a great speech tool, it’s something that they can share with everybody else that they are doing, and it just makes them feel more like they’re doing normal things.

Mandy had also recommended the choir to other people and said:

I would definitely recommend it for kids that want to sing because I know it’s not an opportunity for a lot of kids. I think this is a really good environment for kids who just want to have fun. It’s pretty casual. Well structured, but casual so that the kids can still have a good time. So I would recommend it for a lot of kids because I think it’s a great opportunity and I know a lot of children wouldn’t have an opportunity to sing if there wasn’t choirs like this.

Marly also expressed that she would like to see more inclusive choir groups created:

It would be nice to see other choirs like this start up in other areas. I don’t know that there are any other choirs like this around. I know at one time somebody approached [our choir director] because they were interested in starting a choir out there. It’s a very,

very, very positive experience for the kids and it would be great to see more inclusive choirs starting elsewhere.

Overall, each of the participants expressed something about their experience in an inclusive choir as being positive. Most of the participants shared that this was a welcoming space where all youth who love to sing can come together and have fun. They have all enjoyed their experiences being a part of the group and would highly recommend inclusive choir singing to others. They also felt there was something unique about inclusive choir singing and had seen or personally experienced the sense of “pure joy” as part of the audience, watching the choir members singing together and having such a wonderful time.

Challenges of Inclusive Choirs

One of the challenges was what does participation look like in choir? What do we need to do for her? What's the goal for her? What does that participation look like?
- Kathy

Though participants shared many positive and beneficial aspects of inclusive choirs, not everything about it always works perfectly. Another theme that emerged from the data analysis was the challenges that participants had faced as a result of being involved in an inclusive choir. Participants revealed challenges for families/parents of choir members, choir directors, and for choir members. The following sections present the challenges participants shared about their experiences with an inclusive choir.

Challenges for Families

Several of the parents interviewed shared some of the challenges they have faced as parents or as a family due to their child's participation in an inclusive choir. The main challenge participants shared they had found for families was scheduling. For example, Veronica mentioned that some families have had to drop out due to scheduling conflicts or trouble with transportation to rehearsals. She explained that:

There has been kids that have come and haven't stayed only because it's just not something that they can do... With some people I think it's just that 5'oclock just doesn't work to get their child there. You know especially if they take a bus or something like that. But you know, that's just kind of seems to be the way with a lot of things...

When asked if there was any alternate way of getting choir members to rehearsal if their parents can't she replied that:

Everybody has their own limitations. How do you ask somebody who's already putting a wheelchair into their own vehicle to drive? I know myself, I work until 4:30 pm, I've got to get to the babysitter, get him picked up and get him back over by 5. So even I'm limited on time, as much as I'd like to say, oh you know I'd hope I could help out and pick somebody else up. It just wouldn't work.

Trista and Andrew expressed that motivating their children to go to rehearsals or practice at home can sometimes be a challenge:

Trista: Just getting them to practice is, it's a fight sometimes.

Andrew: Not always, it's another activity that requires encouragement to do sometimes.

Though their children both love to sing, they don't always want to go to rehearsal or practice.

Andrew also mentioned that his daughter "likes to sing regardless, which may or may not be what they're singing in choir." So when she needs to be practicing songs for choir, it can sometimes be difficult to get her to work on what she needs to for the rehearsals or performances with choir.

Overall, families seemed to enjoy their experiences being a part of an inclusive choir. They continue to go back year after year because their children enjoy the group. Feedback about the choir directors was also very positive and appreciative of the work that they do. However, it can sometimes be difficult to avoid conflicting schedules, have reliable transportation to rehearsals, and keep the choir members motivated to practice their songs at home. Choir directors also face some challenges working with families and choir members, which will be discussed in the following section.

Challenges for Directors

When choir directors were interviewed, they revealed some of the challenges they have faced as far as the logistics of running an inclusive choir, and their role as a director. For example, Kathy had found it difficult at first to find a balance between making things dynamic without expectations being overwhelming for certain choir members with exceptionalities. She mentioned that:

One of the things for myself that I had to become very sensitive of is when I would work with a 'regular' group of kids you could really ramp them up and then you can bring them down. And that works fairly well for the most part. But I learned pretty quickly that you can't [do that], you have to be very cautious about how you ramp kids up. So even though we're having fun, it's not fair to kids [with exceptionalities].

Kathy also discussed the challenges of dealing with choir members who have behavioural issues, particularly since choir can sometimes be "unstructured" and as a result "that time has been difficult for them." However, because she operates in the school system, she found that having educational assistants (EA) there has been very helpful and a learning experience for everyone involved:

We have EAs there too so that you're able to keep things on track and make sure kids are still being respectful... So I think most issues that we've had has been working with the EAs in terms of what does participation look like and it's been good learning for support staff on how to adapt for kids, how to cue kids, how to engage with kids, and how to get them participating without it being [negative]. I think lots of times you kind of move into that "You better do it because I said so!" and that doesn't really work when you're in different environments. I think that for our staff they would say they've found that challenging, but it's also something that's the opportunity right?!

Barb and Deb also experienced challenges in dealing with some behavioural issues and realizing that it is not so easy to identify what a person's exceptionality might be just by looking at them, or what needs they have:

Deb: Even if they've got a diagnosis, you know that there is a spectrum...

Barb: ... That first year, when we were just sort of floundering along, we didn't ask anybody what they had, people just sort of showed up and came. What was interesting

for me was that sometimes I wasn't sure who it was that had the disability! Because sometimes your typical kids would do things behaviour wise that I'd go "Hmm maybe that kid's got a disability" and some of the kids who did have a disability were acting quite, so called 'normal' --

Deb: acting appropriate --

Barb: Yeah, acting appropriately. So that's when I came to realize that unless they have something physical, or in their mobility, you weren't necessarily sure of anything...

Deb: and while it is singing for everyone, there are expectations of behaviour, and so if there is not a match then there is discussion... to determine if it's something that's suitable for them.

They have learned that each individual has unique needs, despite what their diagnosed exceptionality may be. The same accommodations will not fit for every choir member and it sometimes takes some experimentation to find what works well for a certain choir member with an exceptionality. They have also found that the choir is not always the right fit for everyone. Sometimes Deb and Barb have had situations where "it's the parents who are more in love with the idea than the kids themselves" which can result in disappointment when:

Their kids, either decided they don't want to be in the choir, or the behaviour of the child is just so disruptive, despite trying different things. And we do try lots of different things...

As choir directors they have had to be very creative to find ways to include those who want to participate in the choir. However, Barb mentioned that it has also been a lesson in recognizing that they are "not specialists" and so they must "make that clear to parents that there is only so much [they] are capable of and they have to meet [the choir directors] part way too."

Other challenges shared by the choir directors included figuring out how to teach specific songs to the choir members and maintain their interest. For example, Barb explained:

There have been a lot of specific challenges along as to how you're going to handle a certain song, or how you are going to teach them to clap on the 2 and 4, or something like that. I think the main challenge for me is how to keep them interested in these songs from beginning to end of their rehearsal cycle so that they'll keep practicing with you in a focused way, but at home they'll be interested in putting on that CD and learning the words.

Deb expressed that she found the vocal leadership and recruitment difficult with her smaller inclusive choir:

For me it's the vocal leadership. It's great to have a group that is singing and enjoying music, but the audience does need to have that sense of pitch, that there is some kind of way to help develop the other groups. So that's the biggest challenge we have right now is finding people of that age group who will be able to [sing], who would love to do something like this.

The choir directors interviewed have found several areas of running an inclusive choir challenging and a learning process as they went along. At times they have had to push choir members to try something that might be difficult or nerve racking for them, but the sense of accomplishment and potential is worth it. Barb shared the story of one choir member to whom she had given a difficult part and worried it was too much, but then it ended up being a good thing "because look it just pushed her, that extra push and now she knows she can do it!" Despite the many challenges for choir directors and choir members in the process of teaching and learning new repertoire, overall it is a positive experience and somehow it comes together in time for the performances.

Challenges for Choir Members

When asked about the challenges choir members may face being a part of an inclusive choir, only a few participants had experiences to share on the subject. George shared that when he first started to sing in an inclusive choir he found it "hard to practice to the CD because it was fast." Due to his limited speech at the time he could not keep up but his mother, Marly, mentioned that with practice:

He's been able to keep up a little bit better. There's still a lot of times where he can't keep up because the song's just too fast for him. But he does the best that he can... and that's the whole idea, just do your best, give it your best shot.

Another challenge that has come up for choir members was scheduling. For older choir members in particular, the demands of high school can interfere with their ability to continue participating in the choir. Another challenge for the older choir members is that “lots of kids have jobs and can’t commit” because their work hours overlap with when choir rehearsals are. This was the case for both choir members with and without exceptionalities. For example one of the choir members with Down syndrome, and one with cerebral palsy were working at part-time jobs. Other than the challenges associated with scheduling and learning new songs, the participants of this study reported no other challenges for choir members.

Different Than Other Activities

The choir is the only one that’s inclusive. They’re involved in other activities, but different activities. - Mandy

Participants were asked to compare their/ their child’s experiences in an inclusive choir with those of other activities they are involved in. For example, participants compared the choir experience to choir at school, or extracurricular sports such as swimming, dancing, or baseball, or other activities that may also be inclusive. For some participants the inclusive choir was the only inclusive activity that they were involved in. However, the parents interviewed often seemed to do what they could to create an inclusive atmosphere at home and to get their children involved in as many extracurricular activities as possible. For example, Mandy explained:

So this is basically the only thing that is considered an inclusive activity that they do. But I mean, we do other things as a family that aren’t specifically considered [inclusive] but we do everything together anyways, but it’s not specifically set up like this [choir] so...

When compared to another activity that her daughter participates in Mandy mentioned that:

Everyone is having a good time and that’s what it’s all about. When she does her swimming it’s, like all the kids have some kind of special needs in the pool, but all the helpers are university students and stuff. So to them it’s like an inclusive group because they are all working together... and it’s like life, life is all about that kind of thing so...

Therefore, in many ways other activities choir members are involved in have a positive environment as well, but the interaction with typical peers is not present. Often the other activities choir members were involved in were specifically for youth with exceptionalities only, or part of a program that partnered older university age students to work with youth with exceptionalities doing activities such as swimming or dancing. For example, George was involved in a softball league for youth with exceptionalities and Marly had noticed some similarities in the importance of friendships there as well:

Well the same thing for ball as with choir, and it turns out there are a few of the same kids that play ball... but again the friendships are very important. Kids just want to be out in the community doing things like other kids.

When asked about the chance to interact with typical children Marly explained:

That's why the choir has been very special, because for some reason it is often difficult to bring 'typical' and 'non-typical' [youth] together and make it work. The choir just seems to have really worked.

Though parents and choir members sometimes had difficulty articulating what it was about an inclusive choir that was different from other activities, they all mentioned that there was something unique about the experience of inclusive choir singing and it's ability to bring typical youth and youth with exceptionalities together unlike other programs. Trista mentioned her appreciation for inclusive/integrated activities, sharing:

What I see when they're integrated [activities] is a sense of relief that there are people out there who are willing to take the time out of their lives to do what they are doing. To help children like ours. I mean, they wouldn't be doing this if there weren't other compassionate kids... I think that's the biggest thing, like I keep saying, I realize when I go there, just that feeling of acceptance, this feeling that I'm not alone out there within this situation, and not being judged.

Observation Results

We have this one boy in the choir, who has a fabulous voice, and he started to sing his solo, and that's when people kind of stopped talking and started to take notice. I was standing at the back watching this all taking place and it was just really neat to watch the people not paying attention, and then all of a sudden they were like "Wow!" and then by the end people were just clapping, the kids got a standing ovation, people were dancing... After they came up and everyone was saying "good job!" and [the choir members] were just beaming! I have never heard anyone with a bad comment.

- Marly

In order to gather more data, observations of a choir rehearsal and performance were done. During the choir rehearsal the focus was on choir member interactions, looking specifically at facial expressions and body posture, side talk, interactions during breaks, and laughter. Notes were also made about the structure of the rehearsal and the choir director's interactions with choir members. During the choir performance the focus was on the audience's reactions. Facial expressions, body posture, singing along, and reactions at the ends of songs were of particular interest. The following sections will present the results of these observations about choir member interactions and audience reactions.

Choir Member Interactions

During the inclusive choir rehearsal I observed that the majority of the time choir members were smiling. They appeared to be enjoying each other's company and singing together. During the water breaks and between songs there was a lot of side talk between choir members and laughter. Choir members tended to be discussing the song they were working on or catching up with each other on the week's activities. There was also a lot of side talk during one particularly difficult song. Occasionally during rehearsal of this particular song, some of the choir members stopped singing and would watch the choir director or other choir members as though they had lost their spot or forgotten the words. Once they figured it out they would join in again. The choir members tended to help each other in these sorts of situations as well. For

example, when practicing clapping while singing for one song some of the choir members struggled more than others to stay on beat. When this happened other choir members engaged with them by making eye contact and pointing to their hands or telling them to watch what they were doing and try to match the beat in that way. This was very effective and eventually all of the choir members were doing quite well at the task.

At this particular rehearsal the choir was being introduced to jazz music. When a recording of a Dixieland jazz band was played for them, several of the choir members started to dance in their seats and there were smiles all around. One choir member turned to the person next to her and exclaimed “It’s really neat isn’t it!?” All of the choir members seemed to be very excited about learning a new jazz piece for their upcoming concert and getting to perform it with a guest vocal jazz group. Further observations were made during this rehearsal about the interactions between the choir director and choir members as described in the following section.

Choir Director and Member Interactions

During the observed choir rehearsal, notes were made on the interactions between the choir director and choir members. The choir members were very receptive to the instructions given by the director. This was evident throughout the rehearsal in that the attention of choir members was focussed on the choir director throughout the rehearsal. Particularly when she was speaking, all eyes were on her. One particular example of the choir members’ reactions to her direction took place at the beginning of the rehearsal. When doing warm ups the choir director reminded the choir members to use proper posture and suddenly all of them stood up very straight.

Though everyone seemed to be relaxed and having fun, the rehearsal was also well structured. When the choir director asked a question most of the choir members were good

about raising their hand and waiting to be called on to give their response. The choir director also demonstrated that she was very good at setting boundaries and maintaining order during rehearsals. For example, at one point in the rehearsal they were reviewing the actions for one of the songs and one choir member was yelling out suggestions for more actions. The choir director acknowledged his suggestions but then explained that since they have limited time they will be sticking with what they had already learned. She handled the situation in a way that only a very skilled and experienced individual would know how to do. When the older inclusive choir group came to join for the rehearsal, they were also respectful in that they sat quietly listening until it was their turn to join the others on the stage to sing. Overall the rehearsal seemed to go very smoothly thanks to the positive dynamics, leadership of the choir director, and respectful interactions between choir members and their director.

Audience Reactions

An inclusive choir performance was observed with a focus on the reactions of audience members. When I first arrived, the audience was very chatty and I could sense the excitement for the concert. When the choir came out and began to sing the audience immediately fell silent and focus was on the choir. Several parents of choir members were video taping the performance from the sides of the room. Some audience members waved to choir members they knew when they first came onto the stage. When there were solos or duets the audience members would often lean over or crane their necks to see who was singing. These are all things you may see at other child or youth choir performances. However, there was something different about this concert from traditional concert settings. The audience seemed to be freer to participate and responded more to the singing than one might see at another performance. The audience was not just sitting quietly in their seats during the songs, but also actively participating

in the experience. Most audience members had big smiles on their faces, and were swaying back and forth or tapping their feet/hands to the beat. Some audience members were even singing along to some of the songs. I even found myself feeling this sense of freedom to become more involved in the experience than I usually would at a choir performance, and overcome with a feeling of joy and excitement at how well the choir members were doing. After each song there was always big applause, and even hollering of congratulations from the audience. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves and there was a very positive and encouraging ambiance throughout the performance.

Through the above mentioned observations and semi-structured interviews, data were collected which provided insight into the inclusive choir experience and perspectives of choir directors, parents, and choir members with exceptionalities. The first theme that emerged from the data were the health benefits that participants had noticed due to their participation or their child's participation in an inclusive choir setting. These benefits included physical, cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of overall health and wellbeing. The second theme involved other positive aspects of inclusive choirs such as a sense of community, shining moments, exposure to different genres of music, and recommendation of the choir to others. The third theme discussed was the challenges that parents/families, choir directors, and choir members with exceptionalities have faced or noticed in others in connection to their participation in an inclusive choir. The fourth theme explored the comparison of inclusive choir singing to other extracurricular activities that choir members were involved in. Data collected from observing an inclusive choir rehearsal and performance provided information about the interactions between choir members, choir members and the choir director, and audience reactions to a performance. All of the results presented in Chapter 4 will be discussed further in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

This basic interpretive qualitative research study was conducted through semi-structured interviews and participant observation to better understand the benefits and challenges experienced by youth with exceptionalities involved in inclusive choir singing. The study also looked at the perspectives and experiences of family members of choir members with exceptionalities and choir directors of inclusive singing groups. This chapter summarizes the findings of this study, and integrates these results with existing literature. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the study, and implications for future research and practice.

Summary of Findings

Fourteen participants were involved in the semi-structured interviews for this study and included parents, choir directors, a choir manager, one typical youth choir member, and youth choir members with exceptionalities (such as Down's syndrome, autism spectrum disorder, pervasive developmental disorder, and cerebral palsy). Despite their different roles connected to inclusive choir singing and diverse range of exceptionalities, participants all shared similar perspectives of the benefits and challenges associated with participating in an inclusive choir. Inductive data analysis of the interview transcripts revealed several common themes. Themes included health benefits, positive aspects, and challenges of inclusive choir singing, as well as comparing choir singing to other activities. Health benefits that participants had experienced included physical benefits (e.g., improved speech, breathing, and posture), cognitive benefits (e.g., better focus and attention), emotional benefits (e.g., self-confidence), and social benefits (e.g., friendships developed). Other positive benefits expressed by participants included the sense of community, opportunities to sing solos or duets, exposure to different genres of music,

positive impact on the audience and community, and that they would highly recommend inclusive choir singing to others. Challenges of inclusive choir singing expressed by participants included scheduling conflicts, maintaining motivation, dealing with behavioural issues, vocal leadership, how to teach choir members certain songs, keeping up with the pace of songs, and the concept of what participation should look like. The final theme was the comparison of inclusive choir singing to other activities. Participants shared that there was something unique about the inclusive choir in that it provides the opportunity to interact with typical peers in a positive, welcoming environment.

Integration of Results with Existing Literature

The results from the current study expand knowledge about the benefits of inclusive choir singing specifically for youth with exceptionalities. The following section explores the commonalities of the findings of this study with existing research literature in the areas of health and wellbeing benefits of group singing, diverse populations and group singing, and inclusive programming.

Health Benefits

As was discussed in chapter one, for the purpose of this study, the concept of health was understood as: one's daily functioning, as well as the process of change and growth when faced with the challenges of life tied to personal circumstances, social, cultural, economic, and environmental influences (Frankish, Veenstra, & Moulton, 1999). The results of this study showed several similar health benefits as were found in existing literature about group singing such as psychological, social-emotional, and physical benefits.

Eight of the fourteen participants in the current study mentioned similar psychological benefits, which they had noticed due to their participation in an inclusive choir. As mentioned

earlier in Chapter 4, improved self-confidence and sense of pride and purpose in choir members was mentioned in interviews. George also expressed having an improved mood after choir rehearsals and that he often feels “really good” after a rehearsal or performance with the choir. Previous literature reviews on the subject done by Clift et al. (2010) and Gick (2011) found that singing contributed to three main areas of overall health and wellbeing: psychological, social, and some physical benefits. First, existing research has shown psychological benefits of singing such as development of language skills, reduced anxiety and agitation, as well as positive affect/improved mood and self-esteem (Gick & Busch, 2012; Riley & Gridley, 2010).

The second, and main, health benefit that participants of the current study appreciated was the social-emotional benefits of choir singing. This included a sense of community, belonging, and the many friendships developed. Every participant mentioned something about the social benefits of the inclusive choir group for youth with exceptionalities. They had all noticed that choir members were very happy at rehearsals, they had developed friendships as a result of being in the choir or as a family member of a choir member, and they all felt that the inclusive choir was a very welcoming and safe social environment. This social connection and positive environment was very apparent through the observation period of this study. Choir member interactions with one another were observed and were very positive, as well as interactions between the choir directors and choir members. Walking into that environment, I even experienced the welcoming nature of the people first hand and experienced a very positive, inviting, and safe environment. Therefore, I could relate to the participants’ comments about the social benefits of the choir during the interviews. Existing literature discusses similar social benefits of choir singing for choir members as well. Riley and Gridley (2010) found that choir members experienced several social benefits such as involvement in the community, developing

friendships, and a sense of belonging, which all contributed to their desire to continue singing in a choir.

Thirdly, physical benefits were noted by seven of the fourteen participants in the current study. Improvements in speech and breathing due to participation in the choir were mentioned. This was particularly the case for choir members with cerebral palsy and downs syndrome. The singing was perceived as having improved their pronunciations of words and taught them to breathe deeper using their abdominal muscles. Trista noted that this improvement in breathing had made a significant difference for her daughter's sleep apnoea and that singing was actually one of the recommendations that the doctor had given them to improve her breathing. Four participants discussed improvements in posture. Two of the choir member participants actually demonstrated proper posture for me during the interview to show what they had learned in choir. This was something that they were starting to apply to daily life as well. Existing literature has also examined the physical benefits of singing. Clift et al. (2010) noted similar physical benefits as were found in the current study, such as improved breathing, speech, and posture mentioned in some of the research they had reviewed. Gick and Busch (2012) mentioned that even just one choir rehearsal could help to improve vitality. Riley and Gridley (2010) also found physical benefits associated with singing such as improved breathing, posture, and overall fitness. Overall, as was found in existing literature, less was discovered about the physical benefits of choir singing (Clift et al, 2010; Gick, 2011). However, Kathy offered one tip, which was to incorporate occupational therapy techniques into the choir experience through stretching and actions to songs. This had been very effective in her inclusive choir.

Overall, several of the same health benefits were discovered in the present study as were discussed in existing literature, suggesting that these health benefits also extend to group singing

with youth with exceptionalities. However, the inclusive environment seemed to be especially associated with social benefits for choir members with exceptionalities compared to findings in previous studies. The following section will discuss the implications for youth with exceptionalities and its contribution to existing literature on choir singing and other diverse populations.

Diverse Populations

It appears that youth with exceptionalities experience many of the same benefits from choir singing as was reported by other special populations in existing literature. As was discussed in chapter 2 several diverse populations have been included in studies about group singing. Existing literature on group singing has focused on the following populations: adults with cancer (Young, 2005), prison choir members (Silber, 2005; Cohen, 2009), individuals with eating disorders (Pavlokou, 2009), patients with chronic pain (Kenny, 2004), university students (Jacob, Guptill, & Sumsion, 2009), elderly choir members and intergenerational choirs (Hillman, 2002; Cusicanqui, 2004), individuals with mental illness (Eyre, 2011), disadvantaged/homeless adults (Dingle, 2012), and amateur youth singers (Bailey & Davidson, 2003). The current study expanded research to a new population, youth with exceptionalities.

Interestingly, some similar results were found in the current study as in previous studies on the diverse populations listed above. For example, youth choir members with exceptionalities experienced social connections and friendships through their experiences in choir as well as improved psychological health. This was also the case in Parker's (2011) research on adolescent choral singers, which revealed that group singing was a place where choir singers felt an intimate connection with one another and an uplifting experience that promoted their overall wellbeing. These were similar to comments made by participants of the current study. Several participants

mentioned the sense of community in the inclusive choir atmosphere, the positive energy, and the sense of pride and accomplishment that choir members with exceptionalities felt after a rehearsal or successful performance. It seemed that the combination of choir singing within an inclusive environment helped to provide these opportunities and benefits for youth with exceptionalities who loved to sing. Other studies have mentioned the social and psychological/emotional benefits of choir singing such as Jacob, Guptill, and Sumsion's (2009) research investigating the experiences of university choir members, Cusicanqui & Salmon's (2004) research on an intergenerational singing group, and Dingle et al's (2012) study on adult choir members with chronic mental illness or disabilities. For example, Jacob, Guptill, and Sumsion's (2009) participants expressed that they had experienced a common sense of community and social bonding, improved mood, and sense of accomplishment through their participation in the choir. Research by Dingle et al. (2012) also mentioned increases in self-esteem and that choir singing provided choir members with the opportunity to participate in a "meaningful activity" and experience "social connectedness" (p. 1).

For the participants in the current study, this opportunity to participate in a meaningful activity and connect with peers seemed to be the most important part of their experience. Many of the parent participants mentioned that it was difficult to find opportunities like this for their children with exceptionalities. Most activities available to this population are specifically for youth with exceptionalities, or involve them working with mentors instead of peers. Therefore, the chance to interact with peers, both with and without exceptionalities, in a positive and welcoming environment was unique and cherished. The following section will explore the integration of the current study and existing literature on inclusive programming.

Inclusive Programming

Through my own experiences I have seen some of the struggles that individuals with disabilities and their families face on a daily basis. Youth with exceptionalities often feel isolated or excluded from activities due to their disability, but activities that allow all children to participate, regardless of their ability level, can create a sense of belonging for all (Abery et al., 2003). I was optimistic to find better and more inclusive ways to work with children with exceptionalities and support them to be successful in their daily lives. By conducting this qualitative study, more can be understood about group singing and wellbeing for youth with exceptionalities. I believed this topic was important to address because, although there are several inclusive choirs operating across Canada, there was little research about the value of inclusive choirs.

Participants of the current study shared stories about some of the barriers they, or other youth with exceptionalities had faced in their attempt to be included in group singing.

Participants were very thankful for the inclusive choir's philosophy of letting everyone participate and have their shining moment. For example, Barb described the first solo of a particular choir member with an exceptionality and how at first he could not sing the words or keep up with the beat, but ended up singing it exactly right by the rehearsal the day before the show. Several stories like this one were shared by participants and they all expressed the pride they felt at having gotten the opportunity to show off their talents or watching their children up there singing so well. Many of the participants also mentioned that often they have felt that a particular song might be too difficult for certain choir members with exceptionalities, but these choir members always seemed to rise to the occasion and the performances were always wonderful.

Only two research studies have looked specifically at inclusive choir singing: Haywood's (2006) case study on the benefits for a 15 year old choir member with a physical disability, and research by Merkt (2012) on an inclusive choir for adults. Therefore, the current study has helped to further research exploring this area. The results of Haywood's (2006) research showed that the participant gained an identity as a musician and identified the many barriers she had to overcome in order to be included in that choir to begin with.

Some of the participants of the current study discussed the challenges of inclusive choir singing for directors and how their philosophies may differ from how other choirs may be run. Deb mentioned that perfection was not the goal for their inclusive choir. She also explained that in her inclusive choir there are different ideas about what a soloist is as compared to other choral groups. In her inclusive choir every choir member gets a chance to have their moment in the spotlight, whether it is by singing a solo, duet, or taking on a Master of Ceremony role at a concert, whereas other choirs often only have a couple of soloists based on auditions for the part. Deb expressed that in an inclusive choir they are "making room" for all. Another similar topic raised by a participant in the current study was the idea of what qualifies as active participation. Kathy discussed the idea of what participation should look like and that it may be a little different for each choir member, depending on his or her exceptionality and abilities. For example, one choir member with autism could only sit in on shorter portions of rehearsals because the noise got to be too loud for her. Merkt's (2012) research on an adult inclusive choir offered some similar ideas for how to work with some of the challenges of inclusive groups such as the fact that it is not realistic to expect that an inclusive choir will create a "traditional choral sound" (p.95) even with training.

Though existing literature on inclusive choir singing is limited, Abery et al. (2003) showed that inclusive group activities are very beneficial for individuals with exceptionalities. The experience of participating in inclusive activities provides the opportunity for social inclusion for individuals with exceptionalities and Abery et al. (2003) suggest that more be done to promote inclusive recreational activities in communities. The current research also backs up this rationale that inclusive activities are beneficial for individuals with exceptionalities, particularly related to the social benefits of interacting with peers, as discussed earlier. However, more research still needs to be done looking at the benefits and challenges of inclusive programming. The following section will discuss some of the strengths and limitations of the current study.

Strengths and Limitations of Current Study

As with any research, the current study has strengths and limitations. Limitations included use of a homogeneous sample and challenges of generating rich interview data. All of the participants of this study were involved with the same inclusive choir program in some capacity. This was due to the amount of interest from that particular group and lack of inclusive choirs within Saskatoon. The program had two inclusive choirs (one for children/youth, and one for older youth and young adults). Since all of the participants were connected to the same inclusive choir program, their experiences were more likely to be similar due to having experienced the same rehearsal and performance environments. However, participants were still quite diverse in the amount of time they had been involved in the choir, their roles, age, and type of exceptionality.

The character and personality of participants were also a limitation in that some participants were more forthcoming with information or better able to express themselves than

others. Some participants tended to give longer responses, which often opened up new areas of conversation connected to the research, where as others gave shorter responses and the interview tended to stick to the questions included in the interview guide. The researcher therefore at times had to work hard to get some participants to expand on their statements. However, overall it was felt that all the participants were friendly, interested in the topic, and contributed useful data to the study.

There are three main strengths of this study. First, it has allowed the experiences and perspectives of youth with exceptionalities and their families regarding their participation in an inclusive choir to be shared. Participants had the opportunity to express the benefits and challenges they have experienced as a result of their involvement in an inclusive choir. By sharing the perspectives of the participants of this study, helping professionals (e.g., counsellors, music therapists, psychologists, teachers, etc.) and choir directors may use it to inform their own practice and take considerations from it when working with youth with exceptionalities.

Secondly, few previous studies have focused on inclusive choir singing and only one case study (Haywood, 2006) looked at the benefits of choir singing for youth with exceptionalities. Therefore, this study has expanded knowledge on the subject and hopefully opened the door for future research in this area, as well as promoting more inclusive programming in the community.

Last, this study is socially valuable in that it aids in better understanding the experiences and perceptions of youth with exceptionalities who participate in inclusive choirs. Findings showed that inclusive programming was beneficial for youth with exceptionalities in several ways and that more inclusive programming may be beneficial throughout the community. In the last decade there has been a push for more inclusion both in the schools and community programming. For example, the National Inclusion Project (www.inclusionproject.org) has been

working over the last ten years to increase awareness of the possibilities inclusion can bring, provide education/information to the public, and partner with communities to create and promote inclusive programming. Another example comes from the University of Concordia where music therapist Dr. Sandi Curtis (2013) recently coordinated the Children's Right to Music project, which specifically looks at understanding and promoting the rights of individuals with disabilities in relation to music therapy and access to cultural/music making programs. The push for inclusion is also happening within the school systems in North America (Salend, 2008). Schools are trying to find ways to provide all students with the resources they need to learn successfully and using a more inclusive model for the functioning of schools. This study can help to further promote, develop, and improve inclusive programming both within the community and schools to benefit youth with exceptionalities.

Implications for Practice

Based on the interviews with participants and results of the current study, some implications for helping professionals such as teachers, counsellors, psychologists, and social workers, as well as individuals in the community are presented. Participants also shared some tips for those interested in starting an inclusive choir in their own communities.

Implications for Helping Professionals

The results of this study are applicable to all helping professions that work with youth with exceptionalities. The health benefits that participants had experienced show the merit of using inclusive programming and group singing, particularly to boost psychological, emotional, physical, and social health. Results of this study suggest that inclusive atmospheres in school and community activities for youth can create a sense of community, belonging, and allow an opportunity for friendships to develop that otherwise may not happen. Youth with

exceptionalities learned to work together with their peers and developed new friendships. The use of group singing was particularly effective in creating an inclusive, welcoming environment because anyone, regardless of ability level, could participate in some way. The philosophy of creating an opportunity for youth to interact and have fun together through music has proven to be very effective, as was shown through the experiences shared by the participants of this study.

Realistically, all helping professionals can't be expected to start up their own inclusive choir groups. However, the results of this study encourage helping professionals to refer interested youth to participate in similar inclusive activities. One of the main philosophies of inclusive choir singing or any inclusive programming is to support each individual's unique needs and strengths so that all can participate and be successful. The idea is that in order to be fair and treat everyone *equally* some individuals may need more accommodations than others. The results from this study suggest that when youth with exceptionalities find an activity that they enjoy, such as singing, and are able to do it alongside typical peers with the proper supports, then several benefits result. Therefore, incorporating more inclusive and creative techniques into classrooms, community groups, and even counselling or music therapy settings is an increase supported by the results of this study.

Some of the participants mentioned that they had had negative experiences with choir groups at schools because they were not as welcoming and inclusive for youth with exceptionalities. For example, Marly explained that in some school choirs the youth with exceptionalities were allowed to participate in the rehearsals, but not perform with the choir at concerts. When discussing inspiration for starting her inclusive choir, Barb also shared the story of a choir member with an exceptionality who loved to sing but was not able to continue participating in her school choir due to the pace of instruction and stamina needed to make it

through the rehearsals. She was also not allowed to perform with the choir at concerts so all the hard work she'd put in through the year to learn the songs seemed pointless. These stories suggest that more inclusive music programs within the schools may be beneficial for all involved.

However, there are certain special skills needed to tackle taking on directing an inclusive choir. For instance, having a background in music therapy or working with individuals with exceptionalities is beneficial for directors. The choir directors involved in the current study had backgrounds in music education, music therapy, and working with individuals with exceptionalities, which was very helpful for them. They were able to maintain order and structure within the rehearsal by setting boundaries and rules that allowed rehearsals to flow smoothly and successfully. They also had very warm, approachable, caring personalities that the choir members seemed to gravitate towards. The choir directors also stressed the importance of true devotion to the choir and sustaining it so that the service would be available for children in the future to participate. This required dedication and a large time commitment on the part of the choir directors as well.

Tips for Starting and Maintaining an Inclusive Choir

An implication for future practice from the current study is how to create a successful and sustainable inclusive choir. Three of the participants of this study provided tips and recommendations for starting and maintaining inclusive choirs. They shared what has worked for their inclusive choir, and ideas of what might help to improve the choir. The information they shared may be helpful for those interested in starting their own inclusive choir group, or who want to improve their current program.

The main suggestions from the participants were to be willing to (a) delegate tasks, (b) communicate with the families, and (c) involve others in the decision making process. Deb mentioned that having a steering committee and visioning workshops has allowed their inclusive choir to be so successful. She felt it was important that when “making decisions about people’s children, that it’s not just you as a director” but a group decision. Maxine also commented on the importance of the steering committee in that it took the pressure off the directors to make all the decisions and allowed better communication with the families involved in the choir. Having parents, or others from the community, volunteer to take on different roles such as choir manager, steering committee member, parent helper (for rehearsals or concerts), and drawing on what different parents can contribute to the group has helped this inclusive choir continue to operate as well as it does, relieved some of the stress on the choir directors, and was one of the main tips participants mentioned for those wanting to start their own inclusive choir.

Another tip that participants shared was that once the choir was established, community outreach and advertising was helpful in promoting the group. Deb explained that their inclusive choir takes advantage of opportunities to perform in the community when possible but that it is also important to have a policy in place of how many performances you will do in the community so that “you don’t wear yourself out or wear your group out.” Performances in the community helped the choir by recruiting more choir members, getting donations, and promoting inclusive programs. Barb also mentioned that advertising through radio stations, television, newspapers, and social media have provided a free way to let the community know about upcoming performances.

Several of the participants of this study mentioned that they appreciated the diversity of song choices and exposure to different genres of music. This is another area that participants

suggested implementing for other inclusive choir groups. Marly mentioned that the songs chosen for the inclusive choir her son participated in were actually quite difficult and challenged the choir members as opposed to choosing the same songs every year or overly easy repertoire. This seemed to help give choir members a feeling of accomplishment when they were able to perform the more difficult songs successfully at a concert. Several of the participants also mentioned that the use of CDs to help the choir members learn the songs was very helpful. The ability to sing along to a CD aided choir members to learn and memorize their parts, along with the regular rehearsals and being given the lyrics. The choir directors were even able to add verbal cues on the CD to help choir members know when a part was a solo/duet or where their part came in for each song.

All of the participants of this study said they would highly recommend inclusive choir singing to youth who might be interested in participating, and that it would be lovely to see more youth involved in programs like theirs. The choir directors who participated in this study mentioned that they have helped a few other inclusive choirs to get started in Canada. The information shared by participants about communication with families, having a steering committee and getting parents/community members involved, outreach in the community, advertising ideas, and using a diverse range of repertoire are all helpful tips for others interested in starting an inclusive choir in their community or school. As Deb expressed, “it starts with the passion and then it’s got to have some kind of a format” in order for the group to be sustainable. It is important to remember that an inclusive choir is a big commitment and though there are many ways one could approach it, finding a way to “sustain, grow, and develop the program so that there is always something like [it]” available to youth is key (Deb). Overall, participants had

found their experiences participating in an inclusive choir to be beneficial and unique, and thought it could be a positive experience for others as well.

Implications for Future Research

There are four main implications for future research based on the findings of the current research regarding the benefits of inclusive choir singing for youth with exceptionalities. First, this study provides a jumping off point for further research on inclusive programs and their potential benefits. Future research aimed at promoting and developing inclusive choir programs or other inclusive activities for youth with exceptionalities, and all youth is greatly needed. Based on the current research, the social benefits of inclusive choir singing were particularly noted for youth with exceptionalities. There is very limited existing literature on inclusive choir singing and though the current study has explored the topic further, more research in this area is needed to better understand the logistics of running an inclusive choir, the needs of youth with exceptionalities, and the benefits of these programs for both choir members with exceptionalities, as well as their families, the community, and the typical choir members. This in turn will promote educating the public about exceptionalities, develop more inclusive recreational activities in schools and communities, and help to support what inclusive choirs are currently striving to achieve and sustain.

The second area to be addressed further in future research is the health and wellbeing benefits of choir singing, particularly the physical benefits. As discussed earlier in this chapter, existing literature has shown similar results to the findings of the current study, even when involving diverse populations. Participants of this study mentioned improvements in psychological, emotional, social, and physical health. However, participants seemed to focus more on the social, emotional, and psychological benefits of their experiences singing in the

choir. Some participants could not think of any physical benefits or struggled to articulate what they had experienced as being physically beneficial due to their choir singing. Therefore, further investigation specifically into the physical benefits of choir singing is warranted.

Thirdly, although the focus of the current literature was on the benefits of choir singing for youth with exceptionalities, several of the participants ended up being parents of choir members with exceptionalities. Their viewpoints were insightful and at times very helpful during group interviews in order for the researcher to understand what the choir member was trying to say. However, it resulted in more information from the parent's perspectives, rather than from the choir members themselves. Therefore further research specifically looking at family/parental experiences being involved with an inclusive choir may be helpful. It would also be beneficial to conduct interviews with more youth choir members with exceptionalities to gather more detailed information about their experiences and views on inclusive choir singing. This would also broaden the variety of exceptionalities included in the research. On the contrary, research looking at the benefits of choir singing for youth with one specific type of exceptionality would also help to further research in this area.

Finally, another perspective not addressed by the current research was the experiences of the typical choir members. Three of the participants mentioned that they have also noticed benefits of inclusive choir singing for the typical choir members such as, developing a broader view of the abilities of individuals with exceptionalities, friendships amongst choir members, as well as learning to have more patience and acceptance for others. Future research could explore the experiences of typical choir members, what motivated them to join the group and continue coming back every year, and the benefits they have noticed due to their participation in an inclusive choir.

Working with Youth with Exceptionalities

Although research in the area of music and wellbeing for individuals with disabilities is beginning to become more popular, there is still much more to learn about this topic (Haywood, 2006). A qualitative study including local inclusive choir members was a good place to start to better understand the struggles families of youth with exceptionalities go through and how singing has been a beneficial, health promoting addition to the lives of their children. Personally when working with individuals with disabilities I often saw how their faces would light up when we sang together. They always seemed to really enjoy the music and interaction with one another, and I did too. There is something about the experience of participating in a fun activity, like singing, and the wonderful sounds of music that brings joy to those involved and those listening as well. The research that has been done so far shows some of the psychological, physical, and social health benefits of singing (as was shown by Clift et al, 2010; & Gick, 2011) and I anticipated learning more about it through my own study.

When conducting research with youth with exceptionalities there were certain accommodations made available that may not be present in other studies. These accommodations include: the use of group interviews, or allowing parents to participate with their children in the interview process. For some individuals with exceptionalities speech difficulties may be present. Some of the participants of the current study had limited speech abilities, had trouble verbalizing their thoughts, or had limited vocabulary due to their age or cognitive abilities. Therefore, having parents present to help elaborate on what their child had said, or clarify what had been said was very helpful. At times youth participants would give a response but I was not able to understand some of the words. Since the parent is much more attuned to their child's speech, they were often able to tell me what the word was or repeat what

the child had been trying to say. It also seemed to make both the parents and youth more comfortable talking with me. Parents were able to be there to know what questions were being asked which reduced any anxiety they had about the process, and it took some of the pressure off of the youth participants as well. Therefore it is suggested that researchers conducting studies with youth with exceptionalities may also find the presence of parents helpful in the interview process.

Though it did not come up during the current study, the severity of the individual's exceptionality would also be a consideration to account for when conducting interviews. If participants are non-verbal, accommodations such as use of assistive technology or a word board may allow easier communication between the researcher and participant. In these cases use of a video recorder may also come in handy. In other situations participants may have less stamina so shorter interview sessions, or meeting with participants a few times for shorter periods of time may be needed.

Conclusion

The findings from this basic interpretive qualitative research on the benefits and challenges of inclusive choir singing for youth with exceptionalities are important to furthering research in the area of singing and health, inclusive programming, and beneficial activities for youth with exceptionalities. Helpful information for helping professionals working with youth with exceptionalities and tips for those interested in developing future inclusive programs for youth were also provided. The results of this study revealed that when given the opportunity to engage in an activity that they enjoy with peers, within a safe and welcoming environment, and with the support and encouragement of adults (parents and choir directors), youth with exceptionalities can thrive. Choir members experienced increases in positive mood, self-esteem, confidence,

sense of belonging and purpose, developed friendships, as well as noticed improvements in speech, breathing, and posture. Overall, participants felt that their experiences as members of an inclusive choir had been positive and beneficial to their quality of life.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

<p>Marya Stonehouse: inclusivechoirsinging@gmail.com Dr. Jennifer Nicol: (306)966-5261</p>	<h3><i>The Benefits of Inclusive Choirs for Youth with Exceptionalities</i></h3>
<p>Marya Stonehouse: inclusivechoirsinging@gmail.com Dr. Jennifer Nicol: (306)966-5261</p>	<p>The purpose of this study is to better understand the benefits of participating in an inclusive choir (a choir that welcomes all singers) and you can help us out!</p> <p><i>Does your child (age 10-17) sing in an inclusive choir?</i> <i>Do they have a diagnosed physical or intellectual disability?</i></p> <p>If so please consider participating in this research study.</p> <p>We'd like to talk with choir members who have a physical and/or intellectual disability (age 10-17), parents, and choir directors. Participation will involve a 60-90 minute audio taped interview and possible observation of a choir rehearsal/performance.</p> <p>If you or your child are interested in participating please contact: Marya Stonehouse (inclusivechoirsinging@gmail.com) or Dr. Jennifer Nicol (jaj.nicol@usask.ca, (306) 966-5261)</p>
<p>Marya Stonehouse: inclusivechoirsinging@gmail.com Dr. Jennifer Nicol: (306)966-5261</p>	<p>The University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board has approved this research project on ethical grounds. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office: ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975.</p>
<p>Marya Stonehouse: inclusivechoirsinging@gmail.com Dr. Jennifer Nicol: (306)966-5261</p>	

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form



Department of Educational Psychology & Special Education
Education Building Room 3104
28 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK, S7N 0X1
Telephone: (306) 966-5255 Fax: (306) 966-7719

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Project Title: The Benefits of Inclusive Choirs for Youth with Exceptionalities

Researcher(s): Marya Stonehouse, Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan, (306) 371-9558, inclusivechoirsinging@gmail.com

Supervisor: Dr. Jennifer Nicol, Educational Psychology and Special Education, (306) 966-5261, jaj.nicol@usask.ca

Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:

The purpose of the research is to advance understanding about singing and health, specifically those associated with inclusive choirs. The project objectives are to explore the perceptions of youth choir members with disabilities, their family members, and inclusive choir directors regarding the perceived health benefits of participating in an inclusive choir.

Procedures:

- After you are contacted by email or phone, an interview time will be set up. Your contact information will be kept private/confidential and not linked with data.
- You can be interviewed by yourself or with a family member.
- Interviews will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. These interviews will be audio recorded
- With your permission, the student research can attend a choir rehearsal or performance to generate further data.
- Interviews will be transcribed, then thematically analyzed and presented with attention to maintaining confidentiality and anonymity.
- If you like, you can read the transcript and summary of your interview. You can also request a summary of the research findings.
- Please feel free to ask any questions about the study's goals, procedures and your role.

Potential Risks:

Potential risks of participation may include psychological or emotional discomfort if you are nervous or anxious about being interviewed or observed, and physical discomfort if you are easily fatigued and tired by talking.

To address these risk(s) you will be treated with respect, and informed that participation is voluntary. You don't have to answer questions you aren't comfortable discussing. You have the right to withdraw at any time, or to take breaks during the interview, or to turn off the tape-recorder if you wish.

Potential Benefits:

You may gain new insights into the connection between singing and health, and your experiences of benefitting from participation in an inclusive choir. You will be contributing to a new area of research.

Confidentiality:

To insure participant confidentiality and anonymity is protected: transcripts and summaries of interviews will be (a) password protected on the student researcher's computer, (b) a coding system will be used to keep your name and contact information separate from data collected during the research and this data link will be destroyed upon completion of data collection, (c) any potentially identifying information will be altered to make it anonymous, (d) you will be given the opportunity to review the final transcript and summary of your interview and asked to sign a data release form authorizing its use in future presentations and publications. All information obtained during the study will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and kept for 5 years in the primary investigator's office, and then destroyed.

Right to Withdraw:

Participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort. Should you wish to withdraw, please contact the student researcher or supervisor to let them know. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until the interview data has been pooled. After this date, it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

Follow up:

If you are interested in seeing the results of the study you may request to see a summary of the results from the student researcher or supervisor.

Questions or Concerns:

Contact the student researcher or supervisor using the information at the top of this consent form.

The University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board has approved this research project on ethical grounds (#12-170). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be

addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free at 1-866-966-2975.

Consent:

Option 1 - SIGNED CONSENT/ ASSENT

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Parent/Guardian</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
_____	_____	
<i>Researcher's Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>	

A copy of this consent will be left with you and the researcher will take a copy.

Option 2 - ORAL CONSENT

Oral Consent: If on the other hand the consent has been obtained orally, this should be recorded. For example, the Consent Form dated, and signed by the researcher indicating that “I read and explained this Consent Form to the participant before receiving the participant’s consent, and the participant had knowledge of its contents and appeared to understand it.” In addition, consent may be audio or videotaped.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Researcher's Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>

Data/Transcript Release Form

I, _____, hereby authorize the release of the transcript and transcript summary of my interview to Dr. Jennifer Nicol and Marya Stonehouse to be used in the manner described in the consent form.

PLEASE CHECK ONE OF THE FOLLOWING OPTIONS:

____ I authorize the release of data without reviewing the transcript/transcript summary from my interview with the student researcher.

____ I authorize the release of data only after I have been provide the opportunity to review, add, alter, and delete information as appropriate from the transcript/transcript summary of my interview with the student researcher.

I acknowledge that the transcript/transcript summary accurately reflects what I said in my interview. I have also received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Participant

Date

Parent/Guardian

Date

Student Researcher

Date

Appendix C: Interview Guide

The following questions will be posed in both individual and group interviews:

1. How did you/your child get involved in the choir? (E.g., how did you hear about it? what made you want to join? How long have you been involved?)
2. What do you think about the choir program? Why keep going? What do you like most?
3. Have there been any challenges associated with participating in this choir group?
4. Can you think of a favourite memory associated with singing in the choir? Please tell me about it. Can you think of another standout positive memory? (Continue to identify and explore as many examples as the participant volunteers)
5. How do you think participating in an inclusive choir has helped you/your child? What do you see as the benefits of having and being a part of an inclusive choir?
6. Have you noticed any specific improvements in health (i.e., overall and holistic as well as components - physical, emotional/psychological, social, spiritual/meaning or purpose) since joining this choir? In wellbeing (i.e., insert definition)
WILL PROVIDE A DEFINITION IF CLARIFICATION NEEDED
7. Has your participation in the choir negatively affected your health or wellbeing in any way? Are there things about choir that you don't like? Anything you think could be improved?
8. Would you recommend that other youth with disabilities/exceptionalities participate in a similar inclusive choir? If so, why?
9. What benefits do you think others could get from a similar experience to your own?
10. Is there anything we haven't talked about/discussed that you'd like me to know about your experiences singing in a choir?

Possible further questions will be responsive to each participant's story. As data collection and analysis progress, these general questions will be revised and become more focused as discovered to be pertinent or not.